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ABSTRACT

In 1977, the Bernard van Leer Foundation began supporting a project in Colombia that had the objective of improving the quality of early childhood care and education in a small village. The Costa Atlantica project offered an approach to development that was based on community organization, social management, participation, cooperation, popular education, and solidarity in the search for the common good. The project began as an attempt to satisfy the needs of children and expanded to include an alternative approach to overcoming poverty. The project team of about 25 people was aided by university students, and received encouragement and partial financial support from the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare. The team claimed to have provided over 100 communities with some form of preschool and a variety of other developments. Such a claim indicated that something in the communities was transforming largely marginalized and disadvantaged settings into positive developmental environments. This book describes the heart and spirit of the Costa Atlantica project. Chapters concern background information, the role of the university as change agent, the role of the community in development, the transition from local experiment to national policy, and the learning that took place during the experience. (RH)

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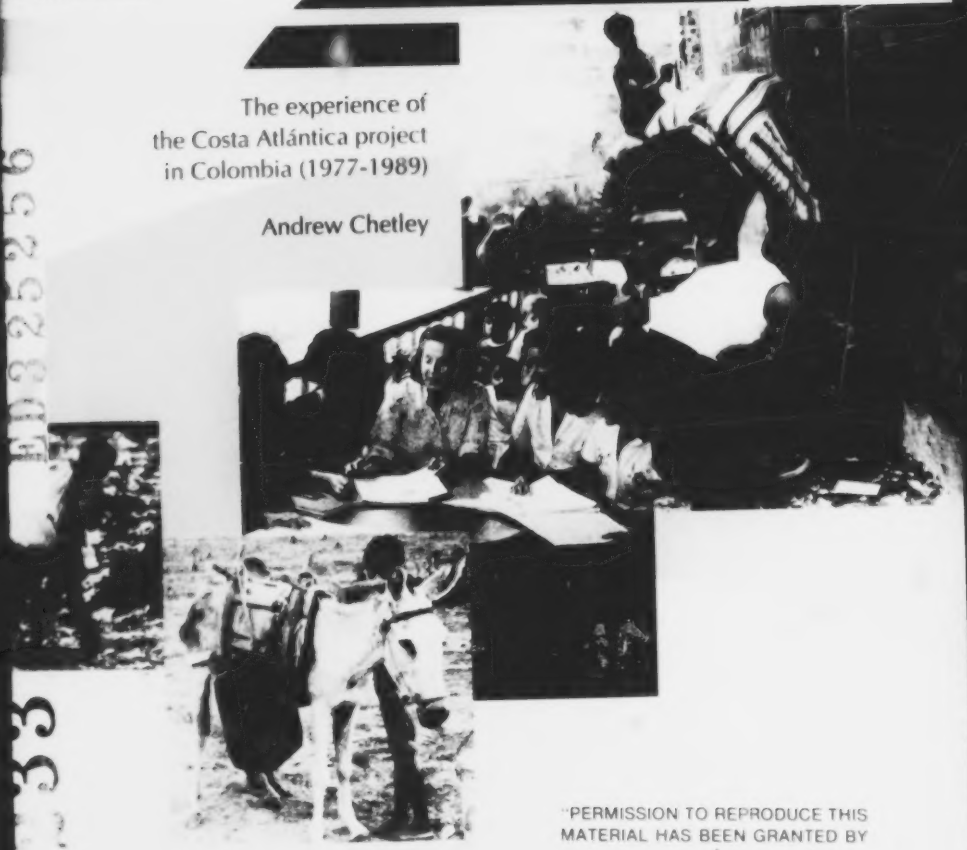
The Power to Change

The experience of the Costa Atlántica project in Colombia (1977-1989)

Andrew Chetley



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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

What is the Bernard van Leer Foundation?

The Foundation takes its name from Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist who died in 1958 and gave the entire share capital of his worldwide enterprise for humanitarian purposes.

What does the Foundation do?

The Foundation supports innovative projects which are designed to improve the educational, social and developmental opportunities of children from birth to eight years of age. Over 100 major projects are currently being suppported in over 40 countries around the world including both industrialised and developing nations. In all cases, the focus is on those children and communities that are least able to benefit from educational and developmental opportunities because of social and other forms of disadvantage. These include the children of ethnic and cultural minorities, children living in urban slums, shanty towns, and remote rural areas, and children of teenage parents.

Who organises the projects?

The Foundation does not organise or manage projects. It works with partners in the countries where the projects are located. For example, project partners include government departments, local municipalities, trade unions, academic institutions and voluntary organisations. These local partners are responsible for all aspects of a project – development, management, training, implementation, evaluation. They also contribute a proportion of the costs in terms of both money and services. A key objective in the initiation and implementation of projects is that the effectiveness of the work they succeed in developing will last long after the Foundation has withdrawn from the project.

How does the Foundation work?

The Foundation does not just give grants, it also provides technical advice, information and professional support to projects in the field. The Foundation Network consists of people associated with projects and the staff of the Foundation. An important part of the support given by the Foundation is the stimulation of exchanges of information, ideas and experiences between projects. Inter-project visits are arranged, seminars and workshops are organised, and publications based on project experiences are produced.

(continued on inside back cover)

The Power to Change

The experience of the Costa Atlántica project in Colombia (1977-1989)

Andrew Chetley

Bernard van Leer Foundation
1990

About the author

Andrew Chetley was born and educated in Canada and trained as a journalist. He worked on daily and weekly publications before moving to England in 1972 where he worked as a campaign officer with the British development agency, War on Want. In 1984, he became a freelance researcher and writer, specialising in health, development, environmental and educational issues and has written extensively on these subjects for a wide range of international and non-governmental organisations as well as for specialised and popular media. Previous publications include: *The Baby Killer Scandal* (1979), *The Politics of Baby Foods* (1986), *A Healthy Business?* (1990) and with Hugh Philp, *A Small Awakening* (1988). In 1988 he joined the staff of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, where he is currently employed as Editorial Associate.

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Thanks are also due to many of my colleagues at the Bernard van Leer Foundation, whose advice, encouragement and support helped immensely in the preparation and writing.

Finally, my wife, Ana Isabel, whose knowledge of life in Latin America and much more fluent command of Spanish was invaluable, deserves thanks for her patient help.

above: countries with Foundation-supported projects; right: Colombia

Foreword

Approximately 10 million children are born every year in Latin America and the Caribbean. Before they are a year old, 700,000 of these children die because of malnutrition and the lack of access to health services. Of every 10 children that survive, six do so in a precarious environment characterised by overcrowded housing, insufficient family income, abysmal conditions of hygiene and some degree of malnutrition.

Although the loss of so many young lives continues to be an apparently inevitable and insoluble fact, when we analyse those factors in the social structure of Latin America and the Caribbean that affect millions of children, we cannot help but think that the relationship between life and death in this part of the world is so dramatically close that, for many people, existence is no more than a living death. They begin to suffer a series of privations which limit their life span from the time they are in the womb. Their brief lifetimes are an unequal struggle with a negative environment which assails the child through hunger, illness, overcrowding and the cultural violence which denies children and their families the fundamental rights necessary for a decent life.

Colombia is part of this reality; the lives of two million children – around 40 per cent of all the children in the country – fall in the high risk category due to malnutrition as well as various forms of neglect.

Although the economic factors are the main cause of poverty, with an unequal distribution of wealth as the most significant element, there is also a lack of rational proposals generated from the experience of the communities.

This is why, with the Bernard van Leer Foundation of Holland, we began a project called 'Costa Atlántica'. From a starting point of trying to satisfy the needs of the children, we endeavoured to develop an alternative approach to overcome poverty. It was an alternative based on community organisation, social management, participation, cooperation, popular education and human solidarity in the search for the common good.

The title of this book written by Andrew Chetley, *The Power to Change*, reflects the deep-seated objective of our work. Our project in Costa Atlántica has been aimed at the children but we have put our work into its sociopolitical environment in that we have struggled to find alternatives that help to overcome poverty, that search for more social justice, for a more participatory democracy and for respect for the freedom of people to build their own lives.

Given the many contradictions and adversities of our society, this work is a ray of hope and a testimony that in Latin America it is possible to aspire to a better quality of life. The great value of Andrew Chetley's book is that it captures not only the contradictions of Colombian society but also the contribution that child-oriented projects can make towards producing social change.

José Amar Amar
Director, Costa Atlántica Project
Barranquilla, September 1990

Abbreviations

CAIPS	integrated day care centres (*Centros de Atención Integral al Pre-escolar*)
CCNS	community pre-schools (*Casas Comunales del Niño*)
CERES	Regional Centre of Socio-Economic Studies (*Centro Regional de Estudios Socio-Económicos*)
DPT	diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), tetanus vaccine
FDNFC	Foundation for the Development of the Child, Family and the Community (*Fundación para Desarrollo del Niño, Familia y la Comunidad*)
ICBF	Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*)
SENA	National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*)
Uninorte	*Universidad del Norte* (University of the North), Barranquilla

Glossary

administrative districts: Colombia is divided into 31 departments, 7 of which (Atlántico, Bolívar, Cesar, Córdoba, Guajira, Magdalena and Sucre) make up the Costa Atlántica region. Each of the departments is in turn subdivided into zones or districts which usually take the name of the principal settlement within their boundaries.

aguardiente: a typical local alcoholic drink, flavoured with anis

barrio: a neighbourhood, suburb or community (usually locally defined), sometimes used in other literature as a term for poor or slum areas

burro: donkey (a common means of transportation in the rural areas of Colombia)

casa comunal, Centros de Atención Integral al Pre-escolar (CAIPS), guardería, hogar de bienestar, hogar comunal, hogar familiar, hogar infantil, hogar vecinal: are all terms referring to pre-schools, day care or kindergarten facilities. The term *guardería* is used generally to refer to any type of crèche facility which looks after children. The various *hogares* differ from each other in subtle ways: numbers of children, type of building, degree of community and parental involvement, and so on. The CAIPS tend to be a more formal approach to child care. The *hogares infantiles* and *hogares vecinales* are variations on the CAIP model – centre-based, but with a degree of community participation and much more emphasis on the role of the para-professional, and therefore less costly. The *casas comunales* are virtually a second name for *hogares familiares* or *hogares comunales* – centres which are based in a home in the community and which usually serve a wider community function – although the *casas comunales* are usually based in a community building rather than a home. The *hogares de bienestar* refer specifically to those facilities established by the government through the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF – Colombian Institute of Family Welfare).

conversion rates to the Colombian peso: for the purpose of providing some type of international comparison, figures cited in Colombian pesos are generally converted to the US dollar, using an average yearly rate prevailing at the time. The rates used were:

Number of pesos per US dollar

1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
36.4	38.6	45.7	47.6	51.1	64.3	78.4	103.1	132	200	222.2	285.7	350

The symbol $ is used throughout the book to represent US dollars. (It is often used within Colombia to indicate pesos.)

jardineras: staff (usually female) at a pre-school or kindergarten facility

Junta de Acción Comunal (communal action committee): in many *barrios* local committees have been established to help direct the affairs of the neighbourhood. The members of the committee are usually people who are clearly recognised as community leaders in some way, and they are generally democratically selected through some type of voting process at general community meetings.

practicantes: university students who do practical training in the communities

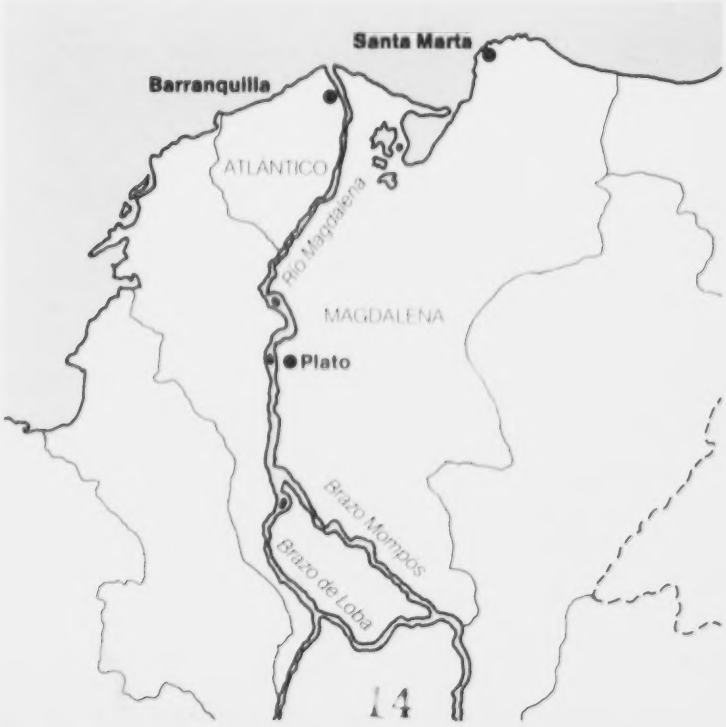
vallenato: a form of music popular in the Costa Atlántica which features the accordian

Facts about Colombia

Total population	30.6 million
under 16 years	11.8 million
under 5 years	4.1 million
urban population	21.1 million (69% of total)
population annual growth rate (1980-87)	2.1%
annual growth rate of urban population (1980-87)	3.1%
Under 5 mortality rate	68
Infant mortality rate	46
Life expectancy at birth	65
Adult literacy rate (1985)	82%
% of grade 1 enrolment completing primary school (1985-87)	57
Gross National Product per capita (US$, 1987)	1,240
Rate of inflation (1980-87)	24%

all data from 1988, except where indicated
Source: UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 1990*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989

left: Colombia's administrative districts and the Costa Atlantica region;
below: the area around Barranquilla and the Rio Magdalena



Introduction

Colombia is a big country with a rough, rugged beauty. It is a land of contrasts, one of which is the contrast between rich and poor. When Colombia features in the world news, it is usually in a report on a new wave of violence in connection with attempts to crack down on the narcotics trade – much to the frustration of the majority of Colombia's law-abiding citizens who would rather see their country portrayed in more positive images. One corner of the country, the Costa Atlántica region in the north, is the setting for just such a positive image. It is the place where remarkable events which could have a profound effect on Colombia's future have been happening quietly for more than a decade.

These events involve a university with a commitment to social development, a government institute concerned with family welfare, educators, parents, children, and people from scores of communities.

In 1977, the Bernard van Leer Foundation began to support a project coordinated by the *Universidad del Norte* in Barranquilla which had the objective of improving the quality of early childhood care and education in a nearby small village. At that time, neither the Foundation nor the project partner in Colombia (nor indeed, the people involved in the project) had a clear perspective on what the possible outcomes could be. It was a high-risk venture, albeit one with a strong probability of some measurable positive impact. In the event, it has become not so much a 'project', but a way of thinking, of doing, of living.

By 1987, when the first comprehensive documents published in Spanish by the university about some of the outcomes of the work began to appear, it became much clearer to the Foundation that something was happening in Colombia that warranted a closer look. A project team of some 20 to 25 people, together with a group of university students, and the encouragement and some financial contribution from the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), was claiming to reach more than 100 communities with not only some form of pre-school provision but a wide variety of other developments. For that to be true, something had to be occurring within the communities themselves to transform what, to a great extent, were marginalised and disadvantaged settings into positive developmental environments.

What was going on? What was happening? were questions which needed an answer. And were there lessons here for other settings, for other countries? Although extensive documentation about the many activities and indeed about some of the results existed, the missing element was that elusive sense of *el corazón y el espíritu* (the heart and spirit) of the project and *el sabor local* (the local flavour). After consultation with the university, and partly as a result of some interviews conducted by a local journalist with people involved with the project which formed the basis of a short feature in the Foundation's Biennial Report,[1] it was decided that there was indeed a 'story to tell'. As a result, I went to Colombia in August 1989 and met with project staff, other university staff and students, ICBF officials, and people from several of the communities.

A catalyst for development

Trying to encapsulate a dozen years of activity in many different communities, as explained by scores of people, is no easy task, particularly when one is looking for what is largely intangible. Yet despite the diversity of backgrounds of the people I interviewed, there was a clear conceptual congruence: the people within the communities, when given the opportunity to do so, were the architects of their own development. Their life experience of living on the margins of society, often in extreme poverty, had made them survivors and had provided them with valuable skills and expertise. By listening to their needs, by exploring with them possible solutions to the problems they faced, by valuing those suggestions and encouraging them to take the first steps towards some solutions, and by building upon the self-confidence and self-esteem that grew as a result, the project team was able to act as a catalyst for a dynamic development process.

This is probably the key message to emerge from the work in the Costa Atlántica, and it is a lesson that is universally applicable. Indeed, Lawrence Salmen, who evaluated two major World Bank projects in South America, came to similar conclusions. He makes the point that in far too many instances

Many people simply do not understand the nature of the projects intended to benefit them. Often there are established local interests – political leaders or entrepreneurs – whose influence on the beneficiaries has been ignored or underestimated. Project components are often viewed out of context, as isolated abstractions in and of themselves rather than as interventions affecting people who have unique histories, locations, and cultures.

When project designers and managers listen to the people, however, their projects can be made to appeal to what people value, to reinforce people's own identity, and to enhance their self-respect. When this happens, when a project touches the inner core of beneficiaries, it becomes a catalyst for self-improvement and the development it achieves becomes self-generating.[2]

Although the work in Costa Atlantica started with some clear objectives, most of them focused on improving the quality of early childhood care and education, it has rapidly become a self-generating activity with a fairly broad scope. In several communities, it is now the community itself that is directing the process, making the decisions, setting the objectives and organising the work. A strong sense of self-esteem is increasingly evident, as is the desire to show that it can be done.

This, surely, is the key to sustaining development. Rather than creating a dependency on outside expertise and finance, the Costa Atlántica project, from its inception, has sought to encourage the development of local expertise and resources.

In the communities most closely involved with the project, this has clearly been the case. And, as the communities developed, so too did the project and the impact it was having on the university and the wider society. Within the university, there has been a growing trend towards extending its resources and expertise out into its neighbouring community and, at the same time, introducing changes within the curriculum which reflect the reality of life in Colombia.

Life in Colombia

That reality is a grim one, particularly for children. One hundred children a day die from hunger in Colombia.[3] The national infant mortality rate is estimated at 46 per 1,000 live births; in the poorer regions of the country, such as the Costa Atlántica, the rate is more than 80 per 1,000. Nationally, approximately 2 million children under five years of age suffer from malnutrition and some 13 million people, more than 40 per cent of Colombia's population, live in absolute poverty, a situation defined as the family's

inability to satisfy its basic needs. As in many other countries, the situation is worst in rural areas: an estimated 70 per cent of Colombia's rural population falls into the absolute poverty classification.[4]

Also, as in many other countries, services in health, nutrition, early stimulation for children, and education are limited in coverage, particularly in rural areas. In the better-off urban areas 89 per cent of homes are connected to a reliable water supply. The figure drops to 28 per cent in the rural areas and to 16 per cent in the poorer urban neighbourhoods. Only 60 per cent of children who start primary school in the urban areas and 20 per cent in the rural areas complete primary education.[5]

For several years, the Colombian government has been attempting to deal with these problems by focusing more attention and resources on the alleviation of poverty. It has been doing so against a difficult political and economic backdrop. Although there has been a reasonable degree of economic progress in the country, an uneven distribution of income (the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population receives more than two-thirds while the poorest 40 per cent receives less than one fifth) and the excessive concentration of rural property and industry in the hands of a few prevent broad sectors of the population from enjoying economic benefits. *Guerrilla* armies, regularly engaged in conflict with government forces, and a huge illegal economy arising from drug traffic have further complicated the situation. Although no accurate figures are available, the export of cocaine and marijuana is widely believed to be worth more than the total income from all of Colombia's legal exports such as coffee, sugar, cotton, bananas and precious minerals.[6]

The drug barons play an active, though generally negative, role in national politics.[7] The economic power of the drug cartels, coupled with their use of violence against politicians and civic officials who have taken a strong position against drug trafficking, has had a strong destabilising effect on the country, particularly in the central and southern areas. The government, trying to deal with the problem, has its resources diverted away from other important social investment.

Although the Costa Atlantica region in the north of the country was at one time more prominently involved in the drug trade, particularly marijuana, there is now little visible evidence of illegal enterprise. The result is that Costa Atlántica is a relatively tranquil corner of the country. Yet that tranquillity conceals a large degree of neglect. In many ways, the region, once important in colonial times, has gone through a period of decline as the country's political and economic foci move towards the central and southern areas, as the importance of sugar as an export crop has declined, and as natural

transportation routes such as the vast Río Magdalena have been supplanted by more modern forms of transport.

Some of the coastal cities such as Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta still boast reasonably thriving economies but the interior of the region is far from developed. For example, Calamar, a few kilometres south of Barranquilla and the boarding point for many boats down the Río Magdalena, is an old colonial city which has been slowly dying since the river lost some of its importance as a commercial form of transport. The large houses, once a symbol of prosperity, now stand slowly crumbling, their paint flaking off, their gardens overgrown. Now that the river mainly conducts small local traffic, Calamar and many of the other towns on its banks are dying or dead. Even around the more prosperous urban centres, the pockets of poverty sprawl in collections of shanty-town suburbs erected on waste ground. Here, the already precarious existence of the inhabitants is further compromised by the hazards of overcrowding, lack of sanitation and pollution from nearby industries.

Decentralisation

Faced with a complex set of interconnected problems, the Colombian government has recognised realistically that there are limits to what it can achieve on its own in terms of possible solutions. It has been pursuing a major decentralisation policy in an attempt to devolve responsibility for public and community services to municipal administrations. At the same time, it envisages that such a process will encourage democratisation and more public and community participation in activities to promote development.

Such a policy has an encouraging ring to it provided, of course, that sufficient resources – human and financial – are devoted to its implementation, and that sufficient time is allowed for communities themselves to grow into a new responsibility with adequate training in necessary skills. The down side to the policy is, like many political strategies, that it comes complete with a set of targets to be met by a specific date. One such target is the establishment by 1992 of 100,000 home-based pre-schools throughout the country to serve 1.5 million children under seven years of age.

Borrowing heavily from the experimental work carried out by the Costa Atlántica project in its early years, the ICBF – which is entrusted with the task of setting up the pre-schools – is discovering the underlying tension which results when a successful small-scale strategy is launched, with modifications, on a much larger scale. Here, too, there are valuable lessons which have relevance elsewhere in the world.

The whole experience in Colombia also suggests the need for a sharper awareness of the *process* of development, not merely its *products*. Do we count the number of new pre-schools, the number of children attending, the improvements in health, the better housing, the increased employment opportunities and say: 'This is development'? Or do we look at the far more subtle changes that occur in individual and communal attitudes and aspirations which provide the basis for future work? In a sense, that brings us back to the origin of this report: how did it happen? And who better to answer than the people of the Costa Atlántica?

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3 Amar Amar, J., 'Proyecto de Atención Integral al Pre-escolar "Costa Atlántica" 1977-1987', *Anuario Científico*, Vol. VI, 1987, p. 321

4 UNICEF, *Country Programme Recommendation: Colombia* (E/ICEF/1988/P/L.12), New York: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1988, pp. 4-5

5 *Ibid.*, p. 5

6 At the beginning of the 1980s, marijuana exports were estimated at $1.4 billion a year, equal to 39 per cent of legal exports. During the 1980s, Colombia has become the site of the world's largest cocaine refineries which supply an estimated 80 per cent of the world market. The *profits* from this are thought to be in the region of $5-10 billion a year. See: Jiménez, M. and Sideri, S., *Historia del Desarrollo Regional en Colombia*, Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1985, p. 160; Márquez, G.G., 'The future of Colombia', *Granta*, No. 31, Spring 1990, p. 92; Dydynski, K., *Colombia – a Travel Survival Kit*, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 1988, pp. 22, 24

7 In 1984 several of the leading members of the drug cartel offered to contribute to paying off Colombia's foreign debt – then some $13 billion – and to invest capital in national development programmes in return for immunity from extradition to the USA to face drug trafficking charges. The offer was turned down by the government. See: Márquez, *op. cit.*, p. 87

New beginnings

A squealing piglet frantically scrambling through the dusty streets in search of its mother shatters the Saturday morning silence in the small village of Zarate. The pungent odour of woodsmoke with a hint of brewing coffee permeates the air. Two young children walk slowly down one of the paths to the river, the Río Magdalena, coaxing the family *burro* along. On its back are the plastic containers that will soon hold the family's daily water supply. Further downstream, three women are standing hip-deep in the river beside a platform on stilts which serves as the communal laundry. They rub soap into the clothes, pound them on the wooden structure, dip them in the water to rinse off the suds, wring them out, and hang them above their heads to dry on the interwoven sticks that form a flimsy roof to the structure.

The river has many roles: it is a source of food and water, serves as the community bathtub and the laundry where clothes are washed, and is the only recreational facility for this rural Colombian village, and for many villages along its banks. Fishing and subsistence agriculture support the fragile economy of Zarate, where there is no electricity, no piped water, no health post. A local woman has had some basic training in health education and she undertakes some simple health care promotion for the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF). In August 1989, she was busy organising the community to take part in a polio immunisation campaign – part of a national effort.

The Río Magdalena – broad, full of rapid currents, with a seemingly endless stream of flotsam composed of lily pads and tree branches – is the main transportation link for the people of Zarate. About 30 minutes away by boat is the town of Plato, the district 'capital'. From here, a small ICBF team tries to encourage community development, education and health care. The local director and one of the ICBF social workers visited the health promoter in Zarate and congratulated her on the work she had done with the polio campaign. Then they asked if she had managed to talk with some of the mothers in the village about the possibility of setting up an informal pre-school to provide some care and education for their very young children. She reported that, indeed, there had been some interest expressed in the idea. The ICBF officials fixed a date to come again and have a talk with a group of the mothers.

This is how it is done in Colombia: *poco a poco* – little by little. An idea is discussed, a few tentative steps are taken, and the beginning of a new way of doing things, a new way of thinking, takes root and starts to grow. The work being started in Zarate in 1989 has a rich history stretching back more than a decade.

La Playa

It began more than 150 kilometres north of Zarate, near the mouth of the Río Magdalena in a small fishing village on the Caribbean coast called La Playa. In 1977, La Playa suffered from the usual effects of underdevelopment: although most houses had an electricity connection, there were frequent power cuts; similarly, although some 80 per cent of houses had a water connection, the supply was irregular and less than half the houses had indoor toilet facilities or showers. The road to the village was a dirt track. The economy was based on fishing with at least 20 per cent of the population of about 4,000 unemployed, and a large percentage underemployed. Sixty per cent of the population earned less than 3,000 pesos ($82) per month. Malnutrition and disease were common. Some 60 per cent of children under five suffered from malnutrition and immunisation levels against common diseases were low: less than half the population had been vaccinated against polio; about one-third had received diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus (DPT) vaccinations, but nearly one-quarter of the population had never been vaccinated against any disease. Less than one-third of the population had completed primary school and more than one-third were illiterate.[1]

Three years before, the national government had recognised that the situation for families and children in communities like La Playa was intolerable and that efforts had to be made to improve their opportunities. Law 27 was passed which levied a two per cent tax on the salaries of all workers in the country to pay for programmes to care for children.[2] The responsibility for

coordinating these programmes was given to ICBF. The most obvious manifestation of this effort was the development of day care centres (*Centros de Atención Integral al Pre-escolar* – CAIPS) or *hogares infantiles* as they were later called. To a large extent, they were formal institutions where children could receive some nutrition and education. Between 1978 and 1984, nearly 26,000 million pesos (approximately $423 million) was spent by ICBF on the creation and support for some 1,500 *hogares* of various types. Even so, it was estimated that these were still only reaching about seven per cent of the pre-school children in Colombia.

Factors which have been identified as contributing to the low coverage include: the high cost of conventional models of early childhood care; the lack of integration of the various state services; scarcity of adequately trained staff; a poor level of applied research into low-cost alternatives; and the limited participation of the family and the community in the development of programmes.[3]

Luis Avila, the director of the *hogar infantil* in La Playa, recalled that at the beginning, parents were reluctant to send their children to the *hogar* because the government had not explained the programme. 'Originally, parents thought that the *hogar infantil* was only for the children of parents who were very poor, who couldn't afford to feed their children properly, or who did not look after them well.' He also pointed out that at first there was not much involvement on the part of the parents because everything was provided for them. 'The people would wait for someone from outside to come and solve their problems.'

José Amar Amar, a psychologist who is the Director of the Postgraduate Programme in Social Development Projects at the *Universidad del Norte* (Uninorte) in Barranquilla, commented that 'in Colombia, it is said that people have a tradition of waiting for God, for the lottery or for the politicians. In other words, they are waiting for nothing.'

José Amar has also been the director of a major educational and development project coordinated by Uninorte since 1977. The project, known locally as the 'Costa Atlántica project', began its work in La Playa, and its initial focus was the development of the *hogar infantil* to provide better early childhood care.

In those early days, many of the ideas about what to do were based on theoretical models – models which, as José Amar explained, were not necessarily valid.

> *To be very frank, when we started the project, we didn't have a very clear idea about what we were going to do. The project was started in*

the psychology division. Our original proposal was basically to explore the possibility of work based on Piaget's theories in an educational model for the children. This seemed fine in the theoretical discussions we had at the university, but after the first contacts with the community, it was different. Universities in Latin America are very far from everyday life. The university has a vision which does not correspond to reality. So at the beginning we had a vision of the work, we made a series of basic studies to decide what steps to take, without questioning Piaget's theory. The theory was developed from children who ate well, who slept well, but these children bore no relation to our children.

There was no special reason for selecting La Playa as the place to start, other than that it was a poor community and it was close to the site of the university. Even before the adoption of Law 27 in 1974, Uninorte had become one of the first universities in the country to offer a pre-school teacher training course. Following on from this, there were negotiations with the regional office of ICBF to develop an experimental programme to improve the quality of early childhood education. The idea was to convert a disused primary school in La Playa into a *hogar infantil*, and the university agreed to provide technical help in training the staff and also some students to work there. An opportunity to try out alternative methods of working with the children, to monitor their development and to see what worked best would be provided.

Social education

However, the reality of life in La Playa soon brought about a change in the project's orientation. The story of a young girl who did not come to the *hogar* one day brought home the need to look for a different approach. She had been sick, and a doctor who was helping the project had visited her and prescribed some medicine. However, José Amar learned that she had died and he went to the child's home. "It was a heart-breaking scene. A woman was holding her and crying. I asked her what had happened, whether the doctor had visited. She told me that the doctor had come and left a prescription. "But sir," she said, "where were we going to find the money for this prescription?"'

More than ten years later, José Amar still felt the poignancy of that child's death as he related the story.

That type of experience had a very strong emotional impact and helped us to realise that our theories did not make sense. We continued with our idea of education, but not the traditional educational model. We could see that formal education greatly isolated the parents. We began to look at new avenues of research. In a very short time we

realised that the problem was not educational but social, and we began to search for a type of social education.

Camilo Madariaga, a psychologist who is the deputy director of the Costa Atlántica project, described another incident that brought home the reality of life in poor communities in Colombia. In order to evaluate the children's cognitive ability, a series of tests were carried out. In one test, children were shown a picture where something was clearly missing and were asked to identify the missing element. For example, with a picture of a table which only had three legs, the expected answer was that a leg was missing.

We found that almost nine out of every ten children said 'the lack of a plate of food'. Initially, this was scored as a bad response. Later when all the examiners met together, we realised that we could not mark that as a wrong answer. The children in these communities rarely have more than one meal a day. For them, the lack of food is a daily reality. The item most frequently missing from their tables is food. Their problem is hunger: if the educational strategy does not take this into account and try to deal with it in a coordinated fashion, then it is not going to achieve anything. This has led us to the need for an integrated solution, as much for the child as a developing person as for the environment or the community. We have to work from the relationships which occur between this environment and the child. It is incredible how from a very precise, very small element, it was possible to reformulate a whole educational strategy, a whole strategy of work.

A key element in that strategy has been the participation and involvement of the parents and the community at large, not only in terms of the education of the children but also in a wide variety of activities which have helped to improve the economic and social opportunities for people in La Playa. As José Amar put it, 'we consider education as a point of departure, not as an end in itself.'

Hogar infantil

With the help of university students (*practicantes*) in the psychology, education, engineering and medical faculties, a pre-school was set up and a series of studies about the needs of the community was initiated. From talking and listening to members of the community, the shape of the project began to change. Although the community contributed its labour to the preparation of the pre-school, it was clear that other concerns were also a priority. Recreational facilities, employment opportunities, adult education programmes, health care and health education, and improvements in sanitation and the general environment of the village were seen as equally important and were gradually incorporated into the project's work.

Nonetheless, as one mother said, 'the *hogar infantil* was the basis for everything else.' The *hogar*'s director, Luis Avila, noted that

> *Before the* hogar infantil *the parents were not concerned about the children's education and development. Infant mortality was high. Now it is very rare for a child to die in La Playa. The parents have learned about the importance of health care, through talks with the university staff, the work of the health post, the work of the communal action committee* (Junta de Acción Comunal), *the results of the population campaign. It is a process. The parents have definitely changed. They now ask for talks about how to take care of the children, how to educate them, how to treat children, how to control birth, how to teach the children about sex education, how to help the children in their tasks in the house, about nutrition, and so on.*
>
> *Originally parents thought that sending their children to the* hogar *would be the solution to all their problems. This has changed now. The teachers spend time with the parents and encourage them to become involved in educational activities with the children. The doctors and nurses have encouraged parents to take responsibility for the health of their children. Various groups have been organised to deal with community problems, and the parents now enjoy being involved in this type of work.*

Epimela Barranco, in charge of the 4-5 year olds at the *hogar*, has worked there for eight years and is one of La Playa's community leaders. 'At first parents didn't want to send their children. We had to go from house to house to encourage them. Now they realise that the *hogar* provides their children with a good preparation for school.'

Involving parents

Part of the process of winning acceptance for the *hogar* was ensuring the close involvement of parents, especially mothers. This began from the moment a mother brought her child to the *hogar*. A staff member would talk to her about the work of the *hogar*, the educational ideas, and try to find out something about the child and the family. A condition of acceptance of the child at the *hogar* was that the mother (or if she was in paid employment, another family member – grandparent, an older sister or brother) was expected to spend a day or two each month in the *hogar* helping the teachers and learning first-hand how her child was getting on. At first, the mothers simply observed how the teachers worked and had the opportunity to discuss with them ideas about the children's behaviour. Slowly, however, mothers began to play a more active role, working directly with groups of children.

The mothers themselves also had the opportunity to form small groups to discuss some issues about child rearing that they were seeing, usually with one of the staff of the *hogar*, and usually in one of the mother's homes. As their understanding and involvement grew, they were soon helping to develop the actual curriculum. Teachers would explain the topics they wished to cover, and mothers would help to identify educational resources within the community which could be used for teaching, including the development of toys, games and teaching aids from locally available materials, often scrap material.

One interesting process which has resulted is the learning approach developed by the mothers. Luis Avila explained that three groups had been set up, each with seven mothers. 'Now, when a problem comes up, for example, a hyperactive child or insufficient language skills, one of the groups will go to the library and research the subject. Then the group presents its findings to the other mothers so that everyone can discuss and share experiences.'

The staff of the *hogar* tries to talk with the parents about what the children have been doing, how they are learning, and about how they are behaving each day when the parents come to collect their children. Apart from this, there is a regular monthly general meeting with the parents' association (*Asociación de Padres de Familia de la Guardería*) the parents and the director to discuss subjects of interest to the community.

Because the money received from the government is insufficient, the parents' association, by helping to raise funds through various events such as dances to support the *hogar*, plays a key role. In 1989 the fundraising helped to install new toilet facilities in the *hogar* and the parents also helped repaint the building. Another event was organised to raise money for some small Christmas presents for the children.

Many of the mothers in La Playa now talk happily about the importance of the *hogar*. As one mother said, 'it gives mothers a chance to go out to work and know that the children are well looked after. The children learn to relate with other people, which doesn't happen so well at home. They learn about colours, how to make things. The children develop more, they are less shy and more active. It's a pity we didn't have this when we were children.'

The *hogar* started with space for 60 children, but this was not enough. The building was extended and now 150 children are registered and about 135-140 attend each day. The *hogar infantil* operates from 8 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. During that time, the children receive two snacks and a midday meal. Checking the nutrition of the children is considered important, and if there are problems, a child is referred to the health post in La Playa. A doctor also visits the *hogar* every month.

A process of change

One of the questions which this type of programme inevitably raises is: has there been any long-term impact on the children? Some evaluative studies carried out in the early years of the project clearly suggest that the children's cognitive skills improved,[4] although no longitudinal studies have been carried out to assess the impact in later years. Nonetheless, talking with some of the children from the first group to leave the pre-school in 1978, it became evident that *they* think it has had impact. Most of that first class of pre-school 'graduates' are now in or have finished the final grades of secondary school. As they sat in a semi-circle in a school classroom, they described one of the changes they had experienced as a result of learning how to communicate better. Their willingness to talk about their school activities, events in the life of the community, and the ease with which they were able to articulate ideas to improve community life and build their own future plans was a clear indication that they had learned to think about the society in which they lived and had learned to care about improving it. And, because they had been through the *hogar* experience, they have become a valuable resource for their younger brothers and sisters. Now, when the younger children come home from the *hogar*, their older siblings can help them in creative play and keep the developmental process going at home. The fact that more and more children are going on to complete primary and secondary school is itself an indicator of the change occurring in La Playa.

Something else has improved as well: the attitude of the people, and their belief that they can achieve change, that they can have a say in their own destinies. In a report published in 1981,[5] the project team noted that this type of programme was not going to solve all the problems of poverty, but that it helped to change the attitude of the people in the community from that of waiting for external aid to comprehending that they could improve their own lives through the use of their own resources and a better use of state and other external resources.

Jimmy Perez, the current president of the *Junta de Acción Comunal* in La Playa, said

> *It has been a process of change in the community. There is excellent collaboration from the families. There is a great civic spirit. The project was the seed and the community continued to nurture the development of that seed. And the community is now in charge of that which was planted by the project. The* Junta *wants to show the community that it can do as well as the university and train leaders so that other people can take over with the same amount of creativity.*

The *Junta*'s education committee has been working with the National Training Service (SENA – *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*), the University and other institutions to provide training courses for people in the community. Between 1977 and 1980, for example, 23 courses were organised covering topics such as first aid, nutrition, family relations, sex education, carpentry, dress making, kitchen gardening, shoe making, plumbing, child psychology and family rights. In all, more than 850 people attended the courses.

Services for the community

For some people, these courses led to a major change in life circumstances. A group of mothers with children at the *hogar* had a discussion with the director of the *hogar* who mentioned the idea that they take some courses to improve income-generating possibilities. One of the mothers, Etilcia Ortiz, liked the idea and with a group requested an instructor from SENA to help them learn how to run a bakery. Today, it is a success, the only source of fresh bread in La Playa. For Etilcia, it has meant the opportunity for her and her family to have a house. But as important was the work which the bakery provided and the sense of self-respect. 'I am most grateful for my work in the bakery and the pride it gives me. My family too, especially my husband, are very happy to see me having my own work.'

Another idea which has taken root is that of a community pharmacy. Epimela Barranco was one of the founders of the community pharmacy. It began from the concern of a group of mothers about the lack of easy access to basic medicines, particularly in the evenings or at weekends when public transport to Barranquilla was not reliable. A further concern was the cost of medicines. The objective was to have a small facility which stocked the most essential drugs and which could provide them at a price lower than the average market price. A committee now runs the pharmacy and maintains the stock of drugs. The pharmacy is 'open' 24 hours a day; that is, the drugs are kept in the house of one of the committee members and in case of emergency, can always be obtained. Ultimately, the hope is to secure a building for the pharmacy. Epimela explained that if necessary, 'people can buy the medicine in instalments' so lack of money is no reason for not receiving treatment. 'The pharmacy is not there to compete with others but to meet people's needs. We also hope to be able to set up a maternity unit and a dental clinic.'

Another community service which has been developed is a library with more than 1,700 books. It started with the donation of some books from Unnorte together with a collection of books from people in La Playa. Located in a room in a secondary school, it is now used by many people in the community, particularly by secondary school children.

Epimela Barranco identified another change: 'the economic situation in La Playa has improved because of the *hogar infantil*. Mothers can go out to work and no longer depend only on the father's income.' Indeed, surveys conducted by the project show that monthly family income in La Playa has been steadily improving, at least in terms of the local currency. In 1981, less than a quarter of families had a monthly income above 15,000 pesos; by 1986, more than half the familes were earning above that level. However, those figures conceal the rapidly declining value of the peso against hard currencies and also the spiraling inflation in the country. Whereas in 1981, 15,000 pesos were worth nearly $300, by 1986 they were only worth $75. Thus, in the microeconomy of La Playa, people are doing better; however, in the global economy, people in La Playa, like those in many parts of Latin America, are sliding further and further behind in terms of buying power on the international market.

Looking for resources

In La Playa today there is an impression of cleanliness, of community pride. Much has been accomplished; there is still much to do. As Luis Avila said, 'it is not all a rosy picture'. One of the difficulties, particularly for the *hogar*, is finding enough time and money to do everything. Some of the longest serving staff of the *hogar* can recall times when there used to be more money for the *hogar*, including enough to provide some of the children with clothing. Now they have to rely a great deal on the parents' association to make ends meet.

Staff salaries, too, are very low. Luis Avila explained that working at the *hogar* is 'the top of the ladder' for the *jardineras*.

> *Their salary is set by law in Bogotá. I think that we do this work because of the benefits it brings for the children, for the community, for our own satisfaction. It is not for the money. The* practicantes *work for no money, it's part of their training. The biggest problem here is the low salary. They keep their spirits high, for example, even when two months went by without pay because of changes in the payment schedule of ICBF.*

The *jardineras* also help to train workers in other communities, and for this receive only expenses but no salary. Some of them would like to study more themselves, to improve their understanding of child development which would help their own careers. However, they work long hours and by 4 in the afternoon are often too tired to study. In any case, it is difficult to get transport into Barranquilla in the evenings to attend courses.

Francis Royett, a psychologist responsible for training in the Costa Atlántica project, made a note of the request by *jardineras* for more opportunities to

study. It was something he would bring up later with the rest of the project team, to see if there was some solution to the problem.

As in Zarate, the development process in La Playa goes *poco a poco*, step by step. As one challenge is met, another emerges to be faced by the people working together. The transformation in La Playa in only some 12 years is remarkable. In another 12, perhaps the people in Zarate too will be looking back in amazement at what they have been able to achieve.

And, as the communities with which it works begin to change, Uninorte itself has been going through its own process of development.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Amar Amar, J., de la Espriella, M. and Echeverry de Téllez, S., *La Playa: Educación Infantil Temprana con Participación de la Comunidad*, Barranquilla: Universidad del Norte, 1981, pp. 14-15

2 The levy has since been increased to three per cent.

3 Amar Amar, J., *Los Hogares Comunales del Niño*, Barranquilla: Ediciones Uninorte, 1986, p. 9

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 144-51

5 Amar, de la Espriella and Echeverry de Téllez, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-19

The university as a change agent

Situated on a hill is the *Universidad del Norte*; the sea is visible from some parts of the campus, its visibility a reminder of its importance to the economy of the region. Nearby, in the opposite direction, is a large, well-kept cemetery, a reminder that death is never far away in Colombia. Some of the tombs are impressive structures; many of the dead are better housed than the living.

Uninorte is compact, with 4,500 students and a faculty of some 500 professors and lecturers, allowing good possibilities for interchange and opportunities to get to know each other. A private university founded in the 1960s, Uninorte was an attempt by business interests in the Costa Atlántica region to improve the quality of university education. The state university in this region, *Universidad del Atlántico*, was poor and weak. The idea was to establish a university dedicated to the development of education, to investigate the social and economic problems of the region, and to offer high quality university education which would be accessible to people from all sectors of society, although most students are still drawn from the upper and middle classes. Clearly, one of the by-products was also to demonstrate that private industries were interested in the social and cultural needs of the region.

In its early days, Uninorte was oriented more towards technical elements with courses in business administration, engineering and industrial psychology. Slowly however, there was a strengthening of the humanities. An important factor which contributed to this change was the Costa Atlántica project.

As project director José Amar put it, 'we have contributed powerfully to change the orientation of this university, in part by the success that the project has had at the national level. Now, the policy of the university, one of its central objectives, is to contribute to regional development.'

An analysis first had to be made as to what the university could provide to a region which, although rich in natural resources such as gas, petroleum, coal, iron and fish, was one of the poorest in Colombia. With high birth, illiteracy and infant mortality rates and low rates of immunisation, primary school attendance and completion, and with limited access to health care facilities and a large degree of unemployment or underemployment, the region clearly had many pressing needs.

The solution to many of these problems rests not with a university, but with the state, with private industry, and ultimately with the people themselves. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and to a certain extent, even into the 1980s, the usual developmental response has been to provide services, facilities or technologies from the top down, in the hope that an extra school, a health care centre, or a small factory would help to provide the spurt that would lead to an improvement in life chances. Regrettably, experience around the world has shown that such approaches generally do not achieve their objectives.

Darryl Jarvis, Tutor in Politics and Development Studies at Flinders University in Australia, notes that the failure of most development models often reflects the discrepancy between concepts in industrialised countries and the reality of life in developing countries.[1] He says that,

> *The distant, abstract, 'ivory tower' approach to the teaching of development studies will no longer suffice to inform and raise the level of understanding of those issues that confront the bulk of humanity. The reality of conditions as they are experienced day after day in the Third World must be brought home to students.... We all need to realise that our subject matter concerns itself with human life: men, women and children, millions of whom are prematurely dying because of inadequate nourishment, shelter, clothing and medical care.*

This was something which Uninorte recognised at an early stage in the Costa Atlántica project in relation to the teaching of psychology and education in particular, and more generally, in terms of the whole concept of the function of a university. As José Amar pointed out,

> *The Latin American university only reproduces culture and generally the dominant culture. Our students know all the theories of the industrialised countries and don't know what happens in the outskirts of their own city; there is enormous ignorance. So we see that the role of the university is, on one hand to rescue popular culture and bring it to the classrooms, and on the other to confront the students with the reality of the society in which they live.*

The project team and others in the university had a series of discussions about how to transform the university. This coincided with the arrival in 1980 of a new university rector, Jesús Ferro Bayona, who wanted to see the university more involved in society. 'I felt that if we could find ways of improving the situation which marginalised communities faced, it would be of enormous benefit to the country.'

Thus, in the early days, the project was experimental in two senses. First, it was an experiment in developing alternative forms of early childhood care and education linked closely with community development initiatives, and second, it was an experiment in defining a new role for the university within its society. As María Mercedes de la Espriella, Director of Uninorte's *Centro Regional de Estudios Socio-Económicos* (CERES – Regional Centre of Socio-economic Studies) and the first evaluator of the project, noted, 'there was no real idea of the scope of the project at the beginning. It was the university's first experience with this type of external extension. The project opened new perspectives about the function of the university.'

Camilo Madariaga, deputy director of the project, said 'it was a slow process, but now the university has a perspective, a vision of what education could be, something connected to the existing social reality, something which cannot simply be discussed in class theoretically, but which has to be lived.'

Curriculum

The project offered the opportunity for students and teaching staff to get thoroughly involved in practical efforts to change the conditions of poverty in the communities. The constant discussion and feedback of experience led to the realisation that the university curriculum had to change, and had to reflect this experience. The traditional thinking behind much curriculum development had to be abandoned and replaced with an approach which involved the family and the community much more. The project has introduced direct reforms in the curriculum towards more work on community development, on the self-regeneration of the communities. At the same time, the teaching staff realised that if the new curriculum was to work in practice, the theory needed to be modified. Different types of information needed to be provided to the students, so that they could interpret and work with the experience they were gaining. The courses began to change to include elements dealing with social psychology, with the education of children, with the social and economic problems of the country, which before had only been mentioned in abstract ways.

María Mercedes de la Espriella explained that 'the contents of the social psychology course were integrated a great deal with the experience we were gaining from working in the communities. The course itself was created as a

result of the project, before, it did not exist. It was a slow process of influencing the curriculum.'

Developing a pre-school curriculum

The curriculum in the pre-schools also went through a careful process of development. In much the same way as the project team recognised that the training of university students was to a large measure unrelated to the reality of the country in which they lived, it was also seen that the 'curriculum' usually used by pre-schools in the country was inappropriate for helping young children to understand their immediate environment. In some cases activities in pre-schools were based on an imported and rigid system designed to prepare children for primary school, while in others the idea was simply to provide minimal day care. The idea of involving the community and the parents in the education of their children was usually absent.

Working on the basis that the education of children living in disadvantaged circumstances had to be a part of a social process which contributes to their integrated development, the project helped to develop a more flexible curriculum. Whereas a more traditional curriculum would focus on language, reading and writing and social skills, the one developed by the Costa Atlántica project uses themes based on the social lives and common interests of the children. It focuses on problem solving by the children and the community rather than on activities centred on the teacher. Instead of obligatory subjects and a pre-established and rigid timetable, it uses the concept of flexible learning blocks, some of which are compulsory and others which can be decided upon according to individual needs. Rather than being restricted to a limited number of textbooks, it makes use of the entire community as a learning resource: the natural environment, the type of work people do, the types of buildings and houses, the services in the community.

In this way, project staff, university teachers, students, parents and the community were able to work together to design and test the various units of a new curriculum. As a result, after considerable testing and revisions, Uninorte published two comprehensive educational guides[2] which are now in wide use throughout the Costa Atlántica region and elsewhere in Colombia. Ethel Pérez, who is responsible for publications generated by the project, said that there has also been considerable demand for them from other countries throughout South America.

The work of the students

This practical approach demonstrates the point which Jarvis makes that development is something that people do, not something to sit around and talk about. By familiarising students with the practicalities of development

and equipping them with the skills which allow them to practice development, the likelihood is that they will be more enthusiastic students.'

Uninorte has found this to be the case. As the university's rector pointed out, 'the students have had not only an experience of, but an interest and effective involvement in, social development as a means of changing the poverty of this region.' Both the Dean of Uninorte's Psychology Department, Beatriz Anaya de Torres, and María Mercedes de la Espriella agreed that this involvement has had a profound effect on the students' professional careers. Academically, it strengthened them. Their outlook has changed and expanded. Indeed, as José Amar said, 'our work is really the work that has been done by the university students. That is, we have been the coordinators, sometimes orientators, but really, the essence of the work comes from the university students, not us.'

The students act as *multiplicadores* – multipliers or catalysts. And in the process, they benefit as well. María Amarís, who now teaches psychology at Uninorte and is the project's training coordinator, said that when she first went to one of the communities as a student,

> *It was a revelation, because it was very different from the theoretical training that we had received in the university. This offered an opportunity to come into contact with the reality of the conditions of the people. We also were able to recognise the ability and assets of the people, which was something special. We were able to see the characteristics of the people who previously, we had only studied in theory, and realised that they were dynamic and energetic as opposed to the stereotype of people unwilling to change their situation.*

Margarita Osorio Villegas, the Director of the Pre-School Education Programme at Uninorte, noted that as most of the students come from the middle or upper classes,

> *Poverty is only something they have seen in a film or read about in a book. Seeing the poverty that exists has had a tremendous impact. At first it is a shock, but gradually they understand the problems of the children and of the communities and they begin to generate a more creative attitude towards working with few resources. They become more realistic. It has been a marvellous change in attitude, a sensitisation. Many of them continue to work in this field.*

Other faculties

Because the process of change within the university was a natural one, there were no real problems with involving several different faculties. The same

people who were teaching were also involved in the project. This allowed a very easy integration. Now there are programmes which function well in communities and which involve the faculties of pre-school education, psychology, nursing, medicine, and civil engineering. The only real difficulties lay in integrating some of this work and, at the very beginning, stimulating the teaching staff in other faculties to move away from their own very academic training and to experiment a little with different ideas.

Margarita Osorio said that about 80 per cent of the teaching staff have a very favourable attitude towards the project and community work. 'The others are against it because they see the work of the project as something only for children and something that is the task of social workers. But the majority are very open to the work of the project.'

Post-graduate programme

Beatriz Anaya said that when the project first began, there was only a vague idea of what the project might accomplish.

> *There was a belief in the possibilities of the project, but it was seen mainly as a pilot project to develop some models which could be applied. We did not really imagine all that could be done or the effect on the community and the university. Many goals have been achieved, but nobody could have foreseen what has happened. Besides, there was no previous experience to draw on. It has been a process of education and development for everyone – there have been changes with the children, the families, the community and the university. It's a dynamic process which has extended naturally into new areas.*

One of those areas has been the establishment of a post-graduate programme in social development projects. María Amarís said that 'the teachers and the students have seen the importance of this dynamic process. The demand for the course has been incredible. We had 30 places, but 111 students applied when it started.'

Research and training

To a certain extent, the initial efforts of the Costa Atlántica project were service oriented: by providing a pre-school the hope was that, together with the efforts to build roads, install water supply, improve sanitation, the quality of life in La Playa would improve. In this sense, as José Amar pointed out, during the first year the relationship between the project and the community had some symptoms of paternalism.[4]

However, when the people involved recognised this, they began to change the project's strategies. A key factor in the change was research. According to Maria Mercedes de la Espriella,

> *It was not a project which simply provided services. It had a strong research component and this became a reference point for other projects. It was interesting to see how the initial idea we had was that it was an educational project, but after about one or two years, it began to change because of the work in the communities and the characteristics of the poverty there.*

Thus, the research was not simply conducted: it was acted upon. Beatriz Anaya described the purpose of the research as 'providing a basis for action realised by the project. I feel that it gives the students an opportunity to connect with the reality of the situation of the people in the communities and forces them to test their theories in action. The research is coordinated and applied so that it doesn't simply stay in a file as a theoretical model.'

And the action occurred not only in the communities in which the project was working, but within the project team itself and within the university. Beatriz Anaya said that the mixture of research, training and extension work 'led to a clarity within the university about this type of work.' At the same time, there was an opportunity to expand the research possibilities. Nearly 60 per cent of Uninorte's publications are in some way related to the work of the project.[5] There have also been many theses written in connection with the project, something which has motivated and stimulated the students to get involved in the research.

Rather than seeing themselves as the 'experts' with the 'answers', the members of the project team were able to be more self-critical and adopt a more catalytic approach to the work. They were prepared to help, but the community equally had to be prepared to contribute its labour, its ideas, its resources. A partnership between the community and the university began to evolve.

Communities

Beatriz Anaya thinks that this type of programme strengthens the people both as individuals and as a group.

> *For example, the changes in La Playa are incredible. The expressions on people's faces have changed. And they believe that they can do it. Sometimes they come here for a solution, and it's difficult for us not to try to solve the problem immediately. If we wait a little they might achieve the solution. Anyway, they have the university here as a*

resource, there are people who can help, but they are not dependent on us.

There have also been other social and structural changes: in levels of organisation in the community, in understanding what is possible. The people are in a better position to appreciate what their possibilities are. People who have been through this experience know that solutions are possible because they have participated in working towards some of those solutions. There is much more hope.

María Amaris said that the work is led by the needs expressed by the mothers involved with the project, and the students are then placed for their practice according to the needs of the community. Grace María de Zubiría teaches Pre-School Education at Uninorte and did her practical work in La Playa. She said that

> *The mothers begin to feel important, to value themselves. In our society, the woman is the one who does not count, she is blamed for everything that goes wrong, but is basically a nobody. Through the experience of this project and the work with the children, they have begun to change. They take better care of their appearance, they go out more, they begin to think of small business ventures.*

Jesús Ferro noted that one of the benefits of the project is an idea the university wants to pursue further: helping municipalities in the region, which often lack sufficient resources, to develop effective systems of municipal administration. "This has important implications for the entire Costa Atlántica region."

Cooperation with other universities and industry

Other universities in Colombia are also taking an interest in this type of work and Uninorte is now looking at the possibility of working cooperatively with some of them. The director of ICFES, the organisation which controls higher education in Colombia, has recently expressed a desire to see if the method of working being developed at Uninorte could be used by all the other Colombian universities. In addition, representatives from universities in Brazil, Central America and Venezuela have come to observe the programme in order to establish similar ones.

María Mercedes de la Espriella, whose job entails considerable consultation with local firms, said that the project has changed the way of thinking of some of the industrialists in the area. The Barranquilla Chamber of Commerce has asked the university to cooperate in a new plan for the development of the city to improve the standard of living for the whole area. There are now three

or four projects in some of the urban areas that have been started by local factories to improve the conditions of people who live nearby.

The stimulus for all of this has been the encouraging changes that are occurring in communities throughout the region, as the project slowly extends its influence to other settings.

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CHAPTER THREE

The role of the community

Confidence, pride, dignity and a strong sense of achievement, of 'being able to do', were all evident in the faces, the posture and the conversation of the community leaders, the mothers and the locally-trained pre-school teachers as they walked up the short hill between two community-run pre-schools in the *barrio* of Tres Ave Marías near Barranquilla.

This *barrio* of some 1,400 people, together with three other communities – Siape, San Salvador and Salgar, all relatively close to Barranquilla – became the focus of the project's work from 1980, although work also continued in La Playa. At that time, as one of the community leaders recalls, there were problems with organisation, with building trust, with involving the people in a programme to improve early childhood care and education and with encouraging community development. Now, he says, 'it is very good. It is a very good change'.

Siape

Tres Ave Marias, Siape and San Salvador are neighbouring *barrios*, near a major industrial area. Their characteristics are very similar, although perhaps Siape, with a population of about 1,800, is the poorest of the three. At both ends of the *barrio*, two large industrial firms form a boundary. The other boundaries are a major road and the Rio Magdalena. At a small wharf, several boats are docked, some delivering goods for the nearby factories; others are believed to regularly carry contraband goods.

A survey by the project in 1981 found that unemployment in Siape was running at about 19 per cent but, as in similar communities, there was also a high underemployment rate. Of those who were employed, most worked in local industries, the service sector, or in construction. Despite the proximity of the *barrio* to the river, less than two per cent of the population were involved in fishing, although some 14 per cent were engaged in 'unspecified work', thought to be related to the unloading of the contraband boats.

Only 47.7 per cent of the adult population had ever started primary school, while only 26 per cent of those who started school actually completed it (about 116 people).

Virtually all the 290 houses in the *barrio* had electricity, and 87 per cent had running water; however, 77 per cent were not connected to a sewage disposal system. This, combined with the fact that 40 per cent of the houses had no indoor toilets and that 44 per cent had showers, suggests that conditions of hygiene were not the best. Only 8.5 per cent of houses had a telephone.

A follow-up survey in 1986 found that the unemployment rate was almost the same although there was some change in the type of work in which people were engaged. As in La Playa, incomes clearly increased over the five years in terms of the local currency, but against an international standard, they fell severely.

By 1986, the literacy rate had improved and more families had water supply and sewage connections. Immunisation had also improved with only 15 per cent of the population never having had any vaccination against 20 per cent in 1981.

According to the doctor at the health post, the children's major health problems are respiratory and skin infections. Many of the adults have problems with allergies. A likely cause is the air pollution from the nearby factories where chimneys belch acrid and often toxic fumes into the air.

The health post is now well received by the community; initially only one or two patients a day came. Now there are at least 10 to 12 per day and the staff has noticed that recently a few people have come from other *barrios*. They see this as an indication of acceptance, because the news about the health post would have been spread by word of mouth. There are also many health education activities carried out by the health post with the community.

Salgar

Salgar is a different type of community from the urban *barrios*. In some ways, it has more in common with La Playa, although its further distance from Barranquilla means that it is a little more isolated, a little more rural. A coastal village with a population of about 2,100 people, it was described in 1983 as having a 'miscellaneous economy'.[1] A 1981 survey calculated that 61.2 per cent of the population was of working age (13-60 years) and not in any type of education; however barely more than half of them actually had work.

The village is heavily dependant on the weekend tourist trade from Barranquilla (Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays). The rest of the week is taken up with a bit of fishing and a lot of nothing. Along the beach are rows of roughly built cafes and kiosks serving drinks and food, usually fish dishes. When a car passes along the beach, the local entrepreneurs all spring into action, frantically waving the driver to pull into their cafe for refreshment. About 21 per cent of the working population is engaged in this activity; 28.7 per cent is engaged in other commerce; 17.8 per cent in fishing; 17.8 per cent in construction; 8.9 per cent in the service sector; and 3 per cent in each of industry and transport. The rest work in agriculture, finance or mining.

A survey in 1981 found that although 63 per cent of the population (1,323 people) had attended primary school, only 18.4 per cent of those who started completed it (243 people). Most of the houses in Salgar were connected to the electricity system, and 72 per cent were connected to the water system; however, in both cases, the supply was erratic. Neither a sewage or a telephone service was in place. Half the houses had indoor toilets and 41.4 per cent had showers.

New types of pre-schools

When the work began in these communities, it was necessary to develop a different type of facility for pre-school care and education. The model developed in La Playa, although less costly than the more formal day care centre, was nevertheless still somewhat expensive. Also, it was limited in the number of children which it could reach. The project began to identify women who were willing to use their own homes as pre-schools, which were called

hogares comunales. Four were opened in Siape, and two each in San Salvador and Tres Ave Marias, each looking after 25-30 children.

Selection of the sites was according to very simple criteria: the houses should be a reasonable size, with enough open space for the children to play outside as well; the family should be small; and the mother should like children and like working with them. They were to be staffed by a *jardinera*, who had been trained in pre-school education at Uninorte; by the owner of the house (*dueña de hogar*) who would prepare the food for the children and also, with some training from the *jardinera*, would help in the care and education of the children; and the voluntary labour of the mothers of the children. The mothers helped out with the *hogar* at least one day per week.

One of the *jardineras*, Lidis Ortega, explained that the work with the children included the development of cognitive ability, aspects of socialisation, and improvement of language skills. The educational guide developed by Uninorte forms the basis for planning the activities and has been adapted to the situations in the three *barrios*. The *jardineras*, the *dueñas de hogares* and the mothers have helped to encourage other activities in the communities, such as the building of playgrounds for the children, and general programmes to clean up the communities.

The mothers pay 30 pesos ($0.09) a month for the *hogar*, which is very little considering everything that the children receive: good attention, opportunities to learn, good nutrition. 'It is only a token amount', said José Amar, 'and if they cannot afford to pay, then it's not important. The children can still come.'

The *hogares* range from the very basic, with little play space for the children, to those which are more spacious and have more materials. In all of them, most of the materials are locally made from plywood or cardboard cartons. Many of these materials demonstrate the ingenuity and inventiveness of the local people.

Some of the mothers are concerned that the conditions of the *hogares* could be better so that the children could be more comfortable. For example, not all of them have fans and so they can get very hot; some of the furniture needs painting and so on. Basically, limited resources are a problem.

Nonetheless, there have been some changes. Most of the people involved with the *hogares* said that in the past mothers did not always look after their young children properly but now things are much improved. Mothers are now able to go out to work and increase their income, knowing that the children are well looked after at the *hogar*.

Beatriz Mendoza, who has been running a *hogar* in her home in San Salvador for eight years summed up their impact:

> *Having a* hogar *in my home has helped me a great deal, because I used to be a very shy person, but now when I go out, everyone says 'hello'. I have become a very popular person, and much more social. I like this very much. At the beginning it was difficult, because my house suddenly became noisy and busy, but I am used to this now. In fact, now I miss the children very much at the weekends. This has been such a good experience, also for the children. Some children hardly knew how to speak when they came to the* hogar, *they didn't know how to interact with other children and now they can talk and play together.*

Hogar vecinal

The *hogares comunales* were possible in Siape, Tres Ave Marías and San Salvador because the community was strongly involved in their establishment and responded eagerly to the opportunity to improve the situation for their children. In Salgar, it was more difficult. Part of the reason for this may have been the long neglect of this community by the government authorities and the resulting sense within the village that nothing would ever change.

Yet change did occur, albeit slowly. Today a *hogar vecinal* (neighbourhood pre-school) looks after nearly 80 children from 3 to 7 years of age. When I visited the *hogar*, the children inside were singing songs, playing, learning. On the front porch, a group of *jardineras*, mothers, the director, some of the adolescents who were among the first children to attend the *hogar* when it opened in 1980, and some of the community leaders were having a spirited discussion about the work of the project, the effect on the community and the work still to be done.

As one of the workers at the *hogar vecinal* noted, 'when the work began with the community it was rejected. But now attitudes have changed. People see the centre as theirs and it is used for meetings, for adult courses, for everything.' A community library with nearly 700 donated books is temporarily based at the *hogar*. The library building, damaged by winds, is currently being repaired.

It is the mothers mainly who are involved with the pre-school. The men see this sort of thing as women's work. A mothers' group has been formed as was a parents' association which includes an equal number of fathers and mothers. The fathers help out by fixing things at the pre-school.

The mothers hold monthly meetings and there have been training courses on topics such as cooking and dressmaking, as well as talks about family

planning and child care. One group of mothers is making dresses as a result of taking one of the courses and they want to set up a workshop to see if it will work as a business venture.

The *hogar* has regular contact with the health post to ensure that the children are in good health. One of the *jardineras* said that the children's health and that of the community in general has improved.

> *The underweight ones put on weight quickly when they started with us. We monitor the weight of the children in a maternal and child programme. For some of the children who attend the* hogar *the only meals they get during the week is what they eat here. On Saturdays and Sundays, at home, they get nothing or very little. The children tell us this, they are very communicative. They tell us everything that happens at home, both good and bad, if the mother is having problems with the father, or whatever. It's very important that the children receive the right nutrition, but the income level of many families is very low.*

One of the mothers said 'this type of child care is very important for working mothers in particular. It is the only real means of help for the community. Before we couldn't work or go out because there was nowhere to leave the children.'

One of the benefits of the programme has been that the children who attend the pre-school continue in their studies successfully unless health or economic problems intervene.

In this sense, said one of the community leaders,

> *The programme has had tremendous impact on the community, which is a community hard to reach, hard to get moving. People have begun to understand more what the project is about. The project in La Playa, for example, or in Siape, is much more integrated with the community. For people here, until recently, they thought the project was simply the hogar. But now people are more conscious that there is more work that can be done in the community. They also realise that the day may come when the institutions and organisations that have been helping will no longer support the hogar and that's why the community has to help support it.*
>
> *We are trying to integrate the community even more because there is a great deal still to do. We would also like to increase the coverage and include more children. We would also like to have a first grade of primary school here to prepare the children even more.*

Taking charge

In 1985, people from the five communities formed their own Foundation for the Development of the Child, the Family and the Community (*Fundación para Desarrollo del Niño, Familia y la Comunidad* – FDNFC) which today administers the pre-schools in those communities and a wide range of other community activities.

Celso Barrios, a community leader from La Playa who has been involved with the project from its inception in 1977 and is a former president of the *Junta de Acción Comunal*, explained that the idea behind the FDNFC was to see if the community could directly manage the project itself. This was in line with Uninorte's philosophy of wanting the communities to take over the projects so that there was no dependency.

Francis Royett, Uninorte's representative on the FDNFC, pointed out that

> *There were three important factors: Uninorte wanted the activities to have an independent nature; there were people in the communities capable of taking over the direction of the work;* ICBF *was willing to provide the budget. In fact at that time,* ICBF *had the financial resources but did not have the personnel who could manage and administer the programme in these communities.*

In the five communities ICBF now provides 36 million pesos (approximately $100,000) for all the *hogares*. FDNFC looks after about 500 children between 3 and 7 years of age, and employs 33 people – *jardineras*, directors of the *hogares*, administrators – for the 10 *hogares* in the five communities. ICBF saw and accepted the need for the *hogares* which had been established by the project as an alternative way of providing pre-school care and education. ICBF felt that this would provide an opportunity for them both to see if the communities could manage the *hogares* and also find out how these alternatives worked.

Hebert Macías, who represents San Salvador and is Secretary of FDNFC, said

> *This was very much in line with the philosophy of autonomy and avoiding situations of dependence. And with all the experience of the early years of the project, we had more organisation, more vitality, more plans, and we had reached the stage where we could take charge. We don't just rely on* ICBF *for the funds. We also look for other sources of funding, locally, nationally and internationally.*

This is important as the funding from ICBF is insufficient for the whole programme. For example, there was not enough money to train the *jardineras*,

something which is fundamental to the work. Training is a key need in the communities. As Hebert Macías noted, the FDNFC tries to encourage new people to become involved in the work and in its management. 'We train young people so that they can step in and continue the work, so that it is not always the same people filling the posts.'

The representatives from the communities are elected annually at general meetings. They then meet once a month to share information on what is occurring in each of the communities and to plan the future work. The FDNFC is trying to expand the areas of work within the communities, by encouraging the establishment of health posts, and by trying to reach out to other communities.

'We try to penetrate into the community through the pre-school which is the base that allows us to deal with other needs, such as a pharmacy, a dentist, a health post, and in that way we can become directly involved in the life of the community,' explained Herbert Macías. 'We also have another goal in this process: the *jardineras* and the directors of the *hogares* must become agents of change within the community. They must promote the development of the community through working with the parents. So they have to have the time to go out and work in the community and promote community development with the parents and the people. We want to train new community leaders for the future and this is the work of each *hogar* in each community.'

The development of community awareness about the possibilities, of what can be done, and the gradual achievements comprise a process of change which is delicate and difficult. The objective is to achieve development without dependence, with a recognition that external resources – like the Universidad del Norte or other institutions, like ICBF – are there to be tapped, but the incentive has to come from below, from the community itself.

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From experiment to national policy

The road from Barranquilla to Santa Marta passes through several kilometres of mangrove swamp on either side. When the road was built, some 20 years ago, many of the natural water channels were closed with a result that most of the trees died. All that is left is a seemingly endless forest of dead branches stretching toward the sky like gnarled skeletal fingers, bleached white from the scorching sun and the salt-laden sea breeze – a haunting testimony to the negative effects of development. Now, several new channels are being dug under the road in the hope that the circulation of water will once again stimulate the revival of this natural environment.

A few kilometres further on, the vegetation changes. Green, fat cactus fingers, looking like two cupped hands, greet the sky. In several places there are fishing villages which look the way La Playa did 12 years ago. The shacks in which many of the people live are made from scrap timber. The roofs are sheets of corrugated tin, usually held on by heavy stones, bricks or timbers. Windows are a luxury. During the day, light creeps in through the gaps in the boards forming the walls or through the single entrance. At night, light comes from the wood fire on the sandy floor, or from a few candles. In some of the

villages there are the beginnings of houses constructed from concrete blocks. This is extreme poverty.

In the distance, the mountains which surround Santa Marta rise out of the morning haze and from the sea, first as dim shadows on the horizon, then as towering shapes covered with green vegetation interspersed with brown patches of arid land.

Like so many places in the Costa Atlántica, the first sight of Santa Marta is breathtaking. It lies round a corner in the road through the mountains, a kilometre or so in the distance, nestled comfortably in a valley with the sea at one end. As the road winds down the mountain, the *barrios* become visible. One in particular, San Pablo, stretches out in a long string across the valley floor and part way up the mountain to the west of the city.

Santa Marta demonstrates the contrasts between rich and poor which are everywhere in Colombia. It has a beautiful beach, arcing around a natural bay. The water is warm and clear – that Caribbean turquoise – and the waves are gentle, barely visible. The sand is fine – like salt and pepper – nearly black but with many grains of lighter colours. One artisan was busy creating a sandscape of bathers and mermaids. Along the bay stretch expensive high-rise hotels and apartments.

When it rains in Santa Marta, the streets become little rivers. Street-wise children and adolescents hurry to major intersections with scrap timbers and a few stones or bricks and hastily construct mini-walkways for pedestrians over the worst puddles. Pedestrians using the walkways are expected to hand over a few pesos for the privilege of keeping their feet dry.

Looking for alternatives

Santa Marta is the site of the ICBF regional office for Costa Atlántica, as well as being the capital of the Department of Magdalena where the third phase of the Uninorte project evolved. Magdalena has a total population of some 850,000 people, most of whom live in or around the principal cities of Santa Marta, Ciénaga, Fundación, Plato and El Banco. About 20 per cent of the population is under the age of 7 and, in the early 1980s, only about 8 per cent of these children were receiving any kind of pre-school education.[1]

By late 1983, ICBF began to analyse the various alternatives for pre-school child care. María Delfina Guerrero de Aarón, the ICBF Director for Magdalena, pointed out that

> *In 1974, ICBF had started working with* hogares infantiles, *but they were very expensive which meant that we could not reach many of the*

children who needed this type of service. We looked for an alternative which could be based in the community and which could involve the community. We knew about the Costa Atlántica project of Uninorte and the work in La Playa and thought there were some possibilities there, although we had some questions about the methodology used in La Playa and the sense and the direction of the work. With Uninorte we planned how to use the experience to develop a distinct alternative in Magdalena.

The work began in the district of Plato which had a population of some 71,000 people, nearly a third of whom lived in the district capital of the same name. The reasons for selecting Plato were three-fold: first, there was a good infrastructure of cooperating services based in Plato itself, including a small ICBF office, health care facilities and a *hogar infantil*. Second, around the district capital were many small communities with the right characteristics to support this type of initiative. Third, Alonso Macías, who at the time was on the regional staff of ICBF, was from Plato. He had just finished his university studies and had been involved with the Costa Atlántica project and thus provided a strong link between Uninorte, ICBF and the community.

María Delfina Guerrero said they began as a community development project, rather than one that was based on pre-school care. The first community selected was San Nicolás, a *barrio* only a few kilometres from Plato, although to the people, the trip to Plato was an expedition. A socio-economic study was conducted with small grassroots groups which helped to identify the real living conditions in the community. 'We found that the community did not see the problem of early childhood care as a priority. Instead the community viewed the most important problems as water, sanitation, health, nutrition of the children, housing, lack of primary and secondary schools.'

Rather than simply providing a service, the idea was to work at organising the community to look for alternative ways to deal with the problems. Small groups were established, each one looking for solutions to specific problems. The two which got going before all the others were the health and the education groups.

At the time, San Nicolás did not have a health post. The people decided to set up small community pharmacies and began to request medicines, as the trip to Plato was too difficult to make, and the prices were quite high for basic medicines. But the main hospital in the area and the health workers were opposed to this and forced the programme to close. One positive effect, however, was that the health authorities realised that the provision of health services needed to be improved and as a result, health promoters now provide some health care in San Nicolás, although not on a regular basis. 'The situation has improved, but it could be better,' said María Delfina Guerrero.

The education committee was able to set up a school and hired a teacher. The community helped to build the school and also set up and administered a school restaurant for the children. Through this process, the community saw for the first time that there was nothing for children under 7 years of age. It was then that the *Casas Comunales del Niño* (CCN) were started, not as a service from ICBF, but as community projects, as community spaces. These were an adaptation of the previous forms of pre-school provision, most closely resembling the *hogares comunales*, but with the additional characteristic that they were to be seen very much as a community space, an important element incorporated from the *hogares infantiles*. Another key ingredient was a flexible approach.

María Delfina Guerrero explained that

> *Each experience is distinct. Each* casa *has its own experience, appropriate to the community in which it is based. The concept of a* casa comunal *is the same, but the methodology is different. There is no fixed model. We only have a basic set of guidelines. We said that:*
>
> *1 the* casa *had to be a space of the community, so that the community would see it as theirs;*
>
> *2 it had to be created using the resources of the community, even human resources, with no salary;*
>
> *3 the community had to administer the financial aspects of running the* casas.

In San Nicolás, several of the mothers offered to help with taking care of the children. It began slowly, only three days a week and only in the mornings, because ICBF wanted the community to be able to grow into the work rather than be overwhelmed by it. However, as María Delfina Guerrero explained, the programme developed its own momentum.

> *We began to train the mothers and found to our surprise that the programme began to develop a lot faster than we were prepared for. We started with 30 children and 26 mothers. Every day there were three mothers who worked with the children. Two of the mothers would work with the pedagogical aspects, recreation, stimulation, socialisation and the other would prepare the food for the children. Every day another three mothers. This provided all the mothers with the opportunity to learn from practice how to take care of the children, how to administer their own programme, and how to project this*

experience into the rest of the community. Another seven communities saw this happening and began to do the same thing without any intervention on our part. We have now extrapolated this experience to another 14 municipalities in the Department of Magdalena.

At the *casa comunal* in San Nicolás, which looks after 50 children, there was active participation by the mothers and the community. 'Everyone knows the *casa comunal*,' said one mother. 'It's a common space for other activities.' The support of the project in the initial stages, particularly three Uninorte students who worked with the community, was described by another mother as 'a great help. At first we didn't know what to do or how to do it. But after a while, it became our own work. We learned how to work as a group. We'd never worked in groups before.'

Everyone was enthusiastic about the work of the *casa* and clearly saw its need. As one mother said, 'it has changed the children, and it has led to better treatment of them. They leave well prepared for primary school and now they tend to stay whereas before they didn't. Some of them didn't even go to primary school.' Another clear outcome was that both the mothers and the children were more self-confident and more outspoken.

Community initiatives

For three years, the project team worked intensively with the community, particularly with mothers, and helped to develop several community-operated pre-schools. By 1987, when the intensive work ended, the community itself was sufficiently motivated to carry on. Some of the women who started helping out by cooking the lunchtime meal for the children learned a great deal about basic nutrition and how important it is for children. They also realised that they liked to cook and were good at it and that there was no place in the *barrio* for people to go to have a meal, so they formulated the idea of setting up a small 'restaurant'. Using the same means that were used to raise funds for the *casa* – dances, selling baked goods – they began to collect the money they needed to get started. First came the land, then the bricks to begin construction. All the walls and half the roof were up before the money ran out. Now they plan to approach a large petroleum cooperative with a facility on the outskirts of Plato to contribute enough funds to complete the building. It has four rooms – one for the cooking, one for tables and chairs for people to sit and eat, one room will be for a small community library, and the fourth room will be an area for another small pre-school centre.

A group of seven teenagers in San Nicolás also took their own initiative. After some initial training, they started a small woodworking workshop in a large yard at the back of one of the community pre-schools. At first it was difficult

simply getting the power supply required negotiating with the electricity company. They devised their own adaptations to the power saw and the drills to be able to mass-produce small chairs and tables for pre-schools in the area, and slowly the business has been growing. They have created their own employment and are learning not only woodworking skills, but the skills needed to manage and run a small business. Eventually, they hope to be able to build their own workshop on another site.

As Maria Delfina Guerrero pointed out, these developments clearly illustrated that 'the processes of community organisation and participation have to take place around concrete projects. Social development is not abstract, it is concrete. When the community is involved in creating its own space, it is going to respond to the development according to its own needs.'

A similar workshop in San Pablo, on the outskirts of Santa Marta, illustrates this point. Organised and run by the community, it provides training and employment for some of the community's young people. It includes a sewing area, a section for metalwork, and a large and busy woodworking facility, which produces wooden tables and chairs, particularly for the pre-school facilities established by ICBF. Between 1987 and 1989, the turnover of this part of the operation went from some 2 million pesos ($9,000) to more than 5 million pesos ($14,285).

Problems of expanding the coverage

As the programme spread, most of the *casas* were set up near urban centres because they were easier for ICBF to administer. By 1987, 56 *casas*, reaching more than 2,800 children, had been established in Magdalena district. At that point, however, national politics intervened. The government decided that there should be an all-out attack on the problems of absolute poverty in Colombia, particularly as these problems affected young children. The objective was to provide the estimated 1.5 million children affected by malnutrition in the country with some form of early childhood care and education, although the focus was more oriented towards nutritional supplements. To do this, 100,000 *hogares de bienestar* are to be established by 1992. These *hogares* will be based around one mother in her own house looking after 15 children for which she will receive a small salary, some basic training, and some follow-up supervision.

Maria Delfina Guerrero pointed out that a major difficulty with this approach was that it was more like providing a service to the community from the outside, rather than encouraging such facilities to grow from within the community's own resources.

The programme of introducing hogares de bienestar *was monolithic and did not allow for the necessary community work to ensure the community's involvement. Nonetheless, we had to implement the programme. As a result, these mothers are seen as employees and it has been difficult to get the involvement of the community in the same way that we did with the* casas comunales. *In the communities where we had been working to establish* casas, *when we said that we now wanted to set up* hogares, *the people in the community said 'we don't want them'. They did not want to turn their* casas comunales *into* hogares.

Tenerife

This was clearly the case in Tenerife, the capital of a small rural district near Plato. The district has a population of about 20,000 inhabitants, of whom about 5,000 live in the capital. Tenerife is quiet, very quiet. The reason for the silence is a total lack of cars. Throughout this part of the country, there are few cars. Those that do exist are usually government four-wheel drive vehicles, a necessity in an area where roads are little more than tracks through the wilderness.

There is a *hogar infantil* looking after 60 children, plus two *casas comunales*, and several *hogares de bienestar*. In both *casas*, the mothers spoke with a unified voice when they compared the *casas* to the *hogares*. For them, the *casas* offered better quality and more involvement and, perhaps most importantly, they had been something set up by the mothers themselves.

In one of the *casas*, which looks after 30 children, one of the mothers said that there had been a need for better infant care and that the *casa* was 'a better way of caring for infants'. There was a clear spirit of enthusiasm amongst the mothers. At a meeting, they talked about how satisfying it had been to set up the *casa*, working with the resources which they had at hand. 'It's our own place', said one. Another added, 'We've learned a lot about caring for children, and that's improved the situation at home and with the family, as well.' Everyone expressed the strong sense of participation. One mother explained, 'we all work together with a unified force. Without collaboration it wouldn't have been possible. The force of one person is too small.' They also spoke about increased self-confidence as a result of the work with the *casa*.

At the second *casa*, which also looks after 30 children, the sense of participation was equally as strong. The mothers helped out with cooking, with some of the games and stories and with organising other activities. 'Here the children get a good education, good food,' said one mother. 'We also have courses for the mothers.'

ICBF entered into negotiations with many of the communities where *casas* had been established. Where there were too many children in the community for the *casas* to care for, the communities could keep the *casas* if they wanted to, but ICBF also set up some *hogares* to look after the overflow. Later, in some of the communities, when mothers working in the *casas* realised that the mothers in the *hogares* were getting some money to look after children, they wanted to be paid as well. So many of the *casas* joined the programme and received the same funds, the same inputs as the regular *hogares*, but continued to operate from the same sites. In other cases, the *casas* were turned into community buildings for other activities – meeting places for adolescent groups, for community leaders, for adult education, for parties – and the children went to the *hogares* for their pre-school activities. No matter which solution was used, the *casas* remained places that belonged to the communities.

Malvinas

This was the case in the *barrio* of Malvinas, on the outskirts of Santa Marta. Malvinas is an invasion site – waste land which homeless families took over and on which they began to erect rudimentary shacks. The population continues to grow as new families move to it. There are at least 1,500 people living there, with some 270 children under 7 years of age. A *casa comunal* was the first type of pre-school set up in Malvinas. It has since become a primary school, and 18 *hogares de bienestar* have been developed to look after all the children in the *barrio*.

At the entrance of the *barrio* are the shacks of the newcomers, primitive structures cobbled together from whatever scraps of wood or cardboard can be found. Further into the *barrio* are several basic kilns for the production of mud bricks. Beyond these are the beginnings of a real village. The *barrio* is like the rings on a tree trunk: the outer area with its flimsy habitation is the newest, while towards the centre of the *barrio*, families who have been there longer are living in better housing. Some houses are now virtually complete, while others are still being built, awaiting parts of walls, or the roofs.

Like San Nicolás and San Pablo, there is a small woodworking workshop which both trains and employs young people. This one however, only started at the beginning of 1989. It produces chairs for the *hogares*. The two important electrical tools, an industrial quality power saw and power drill were both mounted on handmade benches, designed to facilitate the cutting and drilling required for the chairs. There was only one motor for both tools. The workers moved the motor from tool to tool. A result of this was that the motor, already reconditioned, broke down. A local electrician in the *barrio* thought he could probably repair it. However, it would only be a matter of

time before it broke again. Two new motors would ensure continued production.

Despite the severe poverty, there were signs that the community was organising itself. One example was the careful pile of bottles collected from around the community, an indication of awareness about both safety and the potential for recycling the glass. Because of its proximity to Santa Marta, Malvinas receives a fair amount of attention from the ICBF staff. This has obviously been a factor in encouraging some sense of community development, despite the constant growth in the *barrio*'s population and despite the focus on *hogares de bienestar*.

El Pueblito

The same cannot be said for El Pueblito, an extremely poor *barrio* of about 7,000 people on the road between Barranquilla and Santa Marta. Many houses are only half completed; some with no floors, some with no electricity, some with no bath or shower, and *all* without water. The only source of water, other than rain water collection, is a tank truck which makes daily deliveries.

The major health problems of the children are colds and other respiratory ailments and diarrhoea. Parasitic and skin infections are also common. Workers at the *barrio*'s health post pointed out that the environment around the *barrio* was a common dumping area for rubbish and that this contributed to health problems and to the difficulties in dealing with them.

There is a noticeable lack of community support in this *barrio*. An attitude of dependency, together with a sense of hopelessness, still exists. Bit by bit, an association of parents is beginning to organise activities such as recreational parks, but community development in El Pueblito is some way off. It is for this reason that a team from Uninorte has begun to work with the mothers running the 58 *hogares* in the *barrio*.

Rosibel is a student from Uninorte. Like other students involved in working with the project, she spends a week with each one of the mothers in a *hogar*. 'It's a good form of training. I like it and find I become very involved in the work.' Generally, the *practicantes* help the mothers work through the comprehensive guide prepared by Uninorte, and encourage them to develop new themes to explore with the children.

As in other settings, the selection of mothers to run the *hogares* is based on a few simple criteria: that the mother likes children and likes to care for them; that the location and the mother are acceptable to the community; that the physical condition of the house is acceptable; that there are no animals or other dangers to children.

The *hogares* are clearly meeting some basic needs and are providing some benefit, at least for individual mothers. Yadia, a mother who has operated a *hogar de bienestar* in this barrio for 14 months, said 'I'm a very different person now. I've learned a lot.' Leticia, a mother who sends her daughter to one of the *hogares*, is a single parent who works in a supermarket. She said both she and her daughter liked the *hogar*. 'She is learning well, she is getting good nutrition. I'm content. I think it is a good thing. Before this, the only other facility was a *guardería* some distance away, but it was too far, too difficult to get to.' Another mother commented that now she knew the children were safe, and not simply playing in the streets. She had the opportunity to learn a little as well, by working with the children, teaching them songs. There are regular discussions with some of the mothers about what the *hogar* is, what benefit it can have. Nonetheless, as a woman in charge of one of the *hogares* commented, 'it is not easy involving the mothers. Many of them simply want to drop off their children.'

Each of the women in charge of the *hogares* receives 20,000 pesos ($57) a month, which is not a large sum by the time the food for the children is purchased, or, if necessary, the water (which can cost as much as 3,600 pesos a month). There is very little left over for making materials or decorating the *hogares*.

Recently, the mothers who operate the *hogares* have organised a campaign to ensure that the children are officially registered. This should have been done when the children were born, otherwise officially they do not exist and have no legal rights. They have been able to register more than 200 children. Many adults too have now realised that they were never registered.

One of the *hogares* is run by a man, Fernando. Previously, he trained and worked as a pre-school teacher but lost his job. Because he likes to work with children, he decided to apply for one of the *hogares*. He said the training he received from ICBF was focused on education and nutrition, but he felt it didn't completely deal with the reality of the situation in the community. 'There is very little material for work with the children. We have to make the materials out of scrap. It is very difficult to motivate the mothers to help produce materials.' Despite the difficulties, he said he enjoyed the work.

About 20 adolescents in the *barrio* have set up a group to contribute in some way to the development of the community and to organise activities for other young people. One of the members, Sebastián, said that they hoped to work with many different sectors of the community, from pre-school children to the elderly. They had already been involved in a recreation programme with the young children and during school vacations organised outings or games and sports for the children. They have also developed a folklore group and a small dance group. In the future, they hope to accomplish the following: help

with a maternal and child health programme for new mothers; continue their recreational programme for pre-school children; produce family education materials from scrap; develop a small recreational park for adolescents and organise training courses for them; and be trained themselves in working with the elderly. They will also be looking at the possibility of developing small industries or income generating activities. Sebastián said that one of the most difficult problems, aside from the lack of resources, was the attitude of the community. 'We don't expect any help in our work.' Nonetheless they were optimistic. 'With more resources, more training we can do more work. And that means more change, more development.'

Striving for quality

By late 1989, ICBF had established more than 1,500 *hogares* in Magdalena. In some communities, all the young children were receiving at least some form of attention. The concept of the *casas comunales* still survives as well. ICBF has tended to use this form of child care (and community organisation) in rural areas because ICBF, according to María Delfina Guerrero, lacks the resources to work extensively in the rural areas, despite the tremendous problems of poverty, lack of services and lack of basic economic resources. Also,

> *The rural areas are sociologically much more integrated and cohesive. The people are much more involved with each other than in the urban areas. So, the* casas *fit this type of setting very well. They practically function by themselves and we only visit them once a month as opposed to once a week for the facilities in the urban areas. Progress there is constant. We also make use of the 65* jardineras *in the various* hogares infantiles *who not only look after the children attending, but also do a great deal of work in the communities: encouraging community development, training the mothers in health, child development, adult education, monitoring the children's nutrition.*

The two major weaknesses in the use of *hogares* – occasionally referred to disparagingly as *corrales de niños* (corrals or containment pens for children) – are their uncertain quality of care and educational facilities and the difficulty of using them as a focus for community development. Because they have been 'dropped' into many communities, they are often seen by mothers employed outside the home as simply places for leaving the children; provided the children are safe, receive a little food, and do a few educational exercises or play some games, concerns about the quality of care rarely surface within the community. The women running them are generally seen as employees of the state and the community accepts little or no responsibility for ensuring the continuation of the *hogares*. Thus in El Pueblito when payments for the women were delayed for two weeks for example, several

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of the *hogares* closed down for that period. The women running them, heavily dependant on the money from ICBF for their very livelihood, simply could not afford to feed the 15 children in their charge. The contrast between the situation in La Playa, where at one point the staff of the *hogar infantil* survived for two months without payment and kept the *hogar* functioning with the help of the community, or with the various *casas* around Plato, where the community assumed responsibility from the very start, is striking.

The importance of training

ICBF is trying to deal with this problem, largely through training. It makes use of a network of human resources: the 65 *jardineras*, the community development and health promoters employed by ICBF, the professional staff and, where possible, *practicantes* from Uninorte. Together, they have the responsibility for training, supervising and assessing the mothers working in both the *casas* and the *hogares*.

In the major population centre of each district, there is a multidisciplinary team – a lawyer, social workers, nutritionists, psychologists, and social promoters as well as administrative staff. Each team of 15 to 20 people has a leader, and is responsible for looking after a set of specific geographical areas containing 75 to 100 *barrios*. The work is then divided up in a series of interlocking circles. For example, one social worker, one psychologist and one promoter would be given joint responsibility for a group of *barrios*; then, one of the team would have the specific responsibility for five or six of the *barrios*, and would liaise with the *jardinera comunitaria*, the community council, and other community members to develop a community team responsible for carrying out the work. This team's objective is to integrate the community into the work by having them involved in the planning.

Training, a continual process, is also the responsibility of this team. The women receive four hours training every week from community *jardineras*, who are in turn trained by a team of professionals. The training of the mothers is based on their needs and is not theoretical. First, an attempt is made to determine how much the mother knows about the topic under discussion and then the *jardinera* builds on and adds to it. Basically, mothers are trained to observe children, to stimulate their children's development, to play with children (using materials made from scrap), to improve nutrition, and to use family situations to foster children's development.

Uninorte's role in this is to provide advice, assist with the training of ICBF's professional staff, and to research and evaluate the programme. In addition, as María Delfina Guerrero pointed out, 'we also work with the *practicantes* and that's been an enriching experience. We give the students a chance to contrast their teaching with the practice.'

In some of the communities, there are signs that change is occurring. As a result of sharing the common experience of training and of the difficulties of managing the *hogares*, some of the mothers are beginning to set up informal networks among themselves to talk over problems, share ideas, and work cooperatively on things like the production of educational materials from scrap. In communities like El Pueblito, where adolescents have taken an interest in the work, there are some possibilities for reaching further into the community and for breaking down the sense of dependency on ICBF and other external resources. But it is a long and difficult process. Even in communities like San Nicolás, where a strong sense of self- confidence and determination exists, the sheer economic poverty of the setting imposes its own limitations. The ideas, the will, the spirit are there; the resources do not often match.

Sunset over the dead mangrove swamp is impressive: black silhouettes against the orange ball of the sun. The distant haze blends with the wood-smoke from cooking fires in the nearby shacks. The water pools are still, reflecting the stumps of the trees. Tranquillity masks a violence against human dignity, against human potential, that is indescribable.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Amar Amar, J., Guerrero de Aarón, M. and Macías Ospino, A., 'Las casas comunales del niño en el departamento del Magdalena: sembrando el porvenir', *Anuario Científico*, Vol. IV, 1985, p. 150

CHAPTER FIVE

Learning from experience

Nightfall in San Luis, a village near Plato, and the heat of the day begins to mellow. A group of people gather around outside the house of someone who has a television. Twenty people sit on crude chairs, chatting and watching the programme. Others talking, laughing congregate in smaller groups along the low wall by the river. At one of the small bars, another group drinks some beer, some *aguardiente*, and dances to the rhythms of the *vallenatos* playing on a small cassette recorder.

One of the members of the group, an ICBF community promoter, Sara González Alvarado, talks of her feelings about development. She says she wants her people to have a chance to dream and to realise some of those dreams. She says she is simply a community worker, a pre-school teacher, implying that she is not worthy of thinking about vital concepts affecting her country, but her analysis is incisive, her understanding profound. She has recognised that the primary force for change is the community – the people themselves. She has also recognised that the road towards change is difficult and often lonely and painful. Because information is power, the key to development she felt, was educating the people. But the questions were there as well, like deep shadows. How far can the people go before the power brokers – either in Colombia or elsewhere – step in and usurp the development process? How much is permitted before the government and the economic interests step in to distort the process to their own ends? Failure attracts little attention, but success, particularly success at changing people's perceptions of poverty and their possibilities for dealing with it, attracts critical examination.

Unquestionably, the Costa Atlántica project, through its various manifestations, has been successful. Certainly it has its flaws, but they are

largely those that occur in trying to put into practice a new way of working, a new way of organising. They are the flaws which really throws up when attempts are made to change it.

From a simple pre-school project in a virtually unknown little fishing village a set of strategies has been developed, a philosophy has evolved, which is touching the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Colombia. Today, at least some echo of the project exists in more than 125 communities in the Departments of Atlántico, Cesar, Magdalena and Sucre. More than 1,100 students from Uninorte have had the benefit of practical work in the communities, which in many ways has shaped their outlook and in some cases, their choice of careers. More than 4,000 mothers have been trained in aspects of child health and development, and another 15,000 people have been encouraged to take up training courses to improve their employment prospects.

Worries about the future

But as María Delfina Guerrero explained,

> *The future holds many worries – worries about the political situation, the direction of the programme, about commitment. In a political sense, the programme is part of a national policy of democratisation which is not very clearly worked out and the internal situation of the country is very serious, very tense. This type of programme, which sees the community – the actor in its own development, needs democracy and we worry that the programme can be used by political forces. We are giving the community power to make its own decisions and take part in its own development but I wonder if we are ready for that. What will happen if the community tells us that it does not agree with our plans?*

The themes of democratisation and empowerment weave constantly into the very fabric of the work which the Costa Atlántica project has undertaken over the years. At virtually every level – government officials, university staff, project team, *practicantes*, *jardineras*, parents, community members – these ideas are talked about, worked on, internalised.

Everyone feels part of something remarkable, yet no one can quite bring themselves to predict where it will lead. In the current uncertainty of the Colombian social and political situation, perhaps that is wise. But that question lies at the root of much of the current work being undertaken by Uninorte in its attempt to probe a little deeper, to find out not simply what appears to work, but why it works, and what the possible effects might be.

Alonso Macías, who was heavily involved in the project's work in Magdalena, sees Uninorte's role now primarily in terms of basic research to discover some of the more imperceptible effects of establishing the *hogares de bienestar*.

> *When a* hogar *is set up, there are many things that are visible, for example, the number of mothers trained, the number of children being looked after. But it is harder to detect effects at other levels such as within families, in the community, socially, culturally and politically. The* hogares *are creating a new reality in the communities, in the municipalities, in the country. It is a reality that was not foreseen. We have to see what consequences this is having on the life of the people.*

As the project grew, so too did the demands on the project team to examine the outcomes more carefully. Although most social programmes incorporate some form of evaluation, when the work began in La Playa, the Costa Atlántica project did not have a well-defined evaluation model. As Raymundo Abello pointed out, all they had were some basic guidelines.

> *Evaluation was seen as a research activity, a kind of social research to feed back information about what was happening. Some of this research was done at the beginning of the project, to lay down a base line, to give an indication of the problems, of the situation. As a result, we were able to define three areas to look at: effects on the child, effects on the family, and effects on the community. And it was clear to us that it should be possible to look at these no matter where the project was taking place.*

Initially, most of the research was oriented towards assessing the project's effects on children. Tests to see whether the use of the educational guide developed by Uninorte was having a positive effect found that it was. They also found that parental involvement with the education of their children was an important factor in children's development. Simple attendance at a pre-school facility, no matter what type, was found to lead to better cognitive and social performance.[1]

Clearly then, the project was having an impact, but why? It became evident that a different type of evaluation was needed, particularly if the results occurring in one community were to be achieved in others. As María Mercedes de la Espriella pointed out, 'the design of the evaluation of the project has been changing and more qualitative aspects have been added.'

Changing the approach to evaluation

Raymundo Abello and Camilo Madariaga spent considerable time looking at evaluation models and concluded that evaluation of social programmes was in general more like a 'continuous process of searching for overall understanding of the phenomenon being evaluated rather than a final and definitive analysis.' By incorporating qualitative techniques into the more traditional field of quantitative evaluation, they felt it was possible to arrive much closer at that understanding.[2]

As Uninorte's Rector, Jesús Ferro, noted,

> *The State has been interested in statistically measuring the effects of the work, so things like the number of children, number of pre-schools, number of families involved, amount of money invested are fairly easy to measure. Other effects, more qualitative, such as the self-management skills of the community, the initiatives families and communities have undertaken, improved relationships in the family and so on are only really possible to measure by asking people how they feel about things, through a series of interviews, almost like a journalist. And I think we've been able to show that the people in this region are interested in this type of programme.*

One 1987 study of attitudes of people in the original five communities found that 60 per cent of them more favourable to the work of the project[3] – no mean achievement in communities where only ten years earlier most people were passively accepting disadvantage and waiting for someone else to change their circumstances.

Another study looked at the advantages of the *hogar communal* and found that it was cheaper and allowed better coverage than the *hogar infantil*, but the study had not measured the quality of the two types of facilities. Raymundo Abello commented that responses indicated that children who attended the *hogar comunal* were doing better at primary school.

> *We tried to evaluate qualitatively to see if we could understand the information being turned up by the research. We found that the mothers of the* hogares comunales *spent more time with their children than the mothers from the* hogar infantil. *They became very clear in their understanding of the importance of the educational process and they would do anything to send their children to primary school. Through this kind of work, we began to understand the value of the strategy of the* hogares comunales.

Work was then done on measuring the impact of the project in three areas: the attitude of the people, the development of the children, and the social benefit. As Alonso Macías explained, since 1988, basic research has started to try to understand

> *... the dynamics of the life of the child, understand how the child feels, sees, grows, and the same goes for the family. Simply studying the indicators of health, of education or social factors is not enough. We must try to understand the way they think and behave. We must find the knowledge which they already have and work from there, from their daily lives and their logic.*
>
> *By understanding the work with the communities, it becomes possible to transcend an individual community and begin to apply ideas at a larger municipal level, at a regional level, even at a national level. The work with the children doesn't stop with the family; it's a much more complex social network.*
>
> *The questions we are trying to answer through this basic research are how does the family look after and protect the development of the children despite its poverty? The results of this type of research are not something we can immediately use in a* hogar, *but they provide some possibilities for further applied research. Many international organisations don't believe that it is possible to do such basic research in Third World countries because there are not enough resources or skilled people to do it. Clearly, it is important to train people to do this and to find ways of utilising scarce resources, but we think it can be done, particularly if you focus on concrete objectives, trying to determine the various factors which affect the care of young children, for example. The Costa Atlántica project demonstrates that it is possible to do this.*

Primary school

When the project is examined, one question which arises when the children's complex social network is looked at, is what happens at the primary school level? If, at the pre-school level, changes are occurring whereby the parents and the community play a larger role educating children and in supporting the development of basic educational opportunities of some quality, then it follows that they are liable to expect a continuation of those opportunities and quality in primary school and beyond. Yet in the country as a whole, 43 per cent of children who start primary school drop out before completing the full five years.[4]

As one of the *jardineras* from Salgar pointed out

The children from the hogar vecinal *do very well at primary school. The teachers say that they're the best students. The mothers are very proud and often bring the school reports of their children to show us. They learn discipline and lose their fears with us and are quite ready for school; they are very outgoing and participate a great deal in class.*

They have a chance to succeed, to develop the opportunities that will help to lift them out of the conditions of poverty. But this happens only if primary schools exist and only if the quality of those schools is such that they are able to respond to the children's needs and to the needs of the communities in which they live.

Grace María de Zubiría, who teaches Pre-School Education at Unimorte, said the major problem is to achieve continuity.

The problem is the quality of primary education. There are very few schools and the people actually prefer that their children don't go. Children do not have a teacher every day, there are many holidays for festivals, special events, teachers don't bother to show up, they show up late, so the children do not actually get a full year's teaching. This is not just a problem in the marginalised communities. In urban areas the quality of education can also be very bad. Even at university, one can find students who can't read very well, or don't know how to pronounce words properly.

Unimorte's Dean of the Psychology Department, Beatriz Anaya, thinks that the form of primary education has to change to bring it much closer to the idea of pre-school education. "One good thing is that people who have been trained here at the university and are now working in state facilities or in schools have more possibilities to change the work of primary and secondary schools. It's a very interesting process."

Alternatives in primary education

Margarita Osorio, the Director of the Pre-School Education Programme at Unimorte, saw this as a huge problem.

I have an idea that I have been thinking about. I would like to develop a primary school project which is based a little on the model of the hogares. *Someone who has completed secondary school, for example, could set up something similar to the* hogar. *In my house I would collect 15 children, and train them through the five years of primary school. It would be the same 15 children all the way through, and the same nucleus of parents to work with. There should be two pillars to this work: reading writing and mathematics. For me, if children know*

how to read and write, how to communicate and how to do some simple mathematics, it gives them a good basis for future life. And to this one could add some cultural elements. So, with a collection of such little schools in the community it would be enough to provide basic education. There would be some administrative difficulties, but probably not as many as the problems associated with the setting up of regular schools, and the high cost of the formal system. You can't do that in a country where the people have no money. I think that the problem of primary education is a key area that should be addressed as soon as possible.

This type of scheme has already been put into practice halfway around the world from Colombia in 2,500 villages in Bangladesh. A three-year programme of Bangla (the national language), arithmetic and social studies is provided for 8 to 10 year olds. Classes are held in simple buildings, constructed and maintained by the community. The teachers are not fully trained professionals, but better-educated villagers who take part in an intensive 12-day training course and receive regular guidance, supervision and refresher training. They are paid a small monthly salary, and are provided with a blackboard, a stool, and a trunk in which to keep educational materials. The children each receive a slate, pencils, notebooks, and textbooks. Parents' meetings are held monthly and are well attended, and allow parents and community leaders a large say in the operation of the schools. The cost is about $15 per pupil per year. The drop-out rate is only 1.5 per cent over three years. A remarkable 95 per cent of the children have passed examinations for entry into the fourth year of the official primary education system, and most have successfully made the transition and carried on with their education.[5]

Closer to home, the Colombian government has been developing a 'New School' programme (*Programa Escuela Nueva*) in an attempt to guarantee primary school coverage in the rural areas. By early 1990 the programme was being implemented in some 17,000 schools, reaching more than 900,000 children. A key element is a flexible grade promotion policy. Learning achievement is recognised as not simply the number of years of schooling, but the applicability of what the children learn to their surroundings. Children are able to attend school during the times of the year when they are not required at home to help out with harvesting crops or looking after younger siblings while their parents are busy with agricultural production. By following a series of self-instruction workbooks, they can pick up from where they left off in their previous session in the school. The schools use an active methodology that facilitates learning by doing and playing and encourages problem solving. The children also have an opportunity to take part in governing the school, which encourages civic and democratic attitudes and engenders a spirit of cooperation. Parents, too, participate in school activities and the school promotes actions that benefit the entire community, and acts

as an information centre for the community. The training of teachers has been decentralised and follow-up sessions take place with the teachers working together in groups to exchange their own teaching experiences. A recent evaluation indicates that nearly 90 per cent of teachers believe that the New School is superior to other traditional rural schools. In tests on socio-civic behaviour, self-esteem, mathematics and Spanish, children in the New School programme obtained considerably higher marks than those in traditional rural schools.[6] Vicky Colbert de Arboleda, UNICEF's regional education adviser who is based in Colombia, said the only major difficulty with the scheme is one which is also being faced by the programme to develop the *hogares de bienestar*: a deterioration in quality when the programme went from an experimental phase involving just 150 schools, through an extension to 3,000 schools and then to its current 17,000 schools. An attempt to deal with this has been made by establishing a demonstration model so that schools could maintain standards, and by improving training for the teachers.[7]

Low cost

Maximising the use of available resources has been a key objective of the Costa Atlántica project. Studies of the cost effectiveness of the various types of pre-school facilities demonstrate that the *casa comunal* model is about eight times less expensive than the *hogar infantil*, which itself was less expensive than the original CAIP model.[8] The indications are that the *hogares de bienestar* will be cheaper still. However, some problems remain.

First, *total* cost per pupil per year in a *casa comunal* was estimated in 1985 to be about $45 – a tremendous amount of money to find if one is trying to spread such a programme throughout an entire country. Even just the payments to the women operating the *hogares de bienestar* work out at about $4 per pupil per year, without taking into account the training, supervision, and administrative costs and the costs of basic materials and equipment. The total involved in attempting to disseminate nationally is a large sum. Although some of the costs can be covered by local resources from the communities involved, the basic infrastructure still needs to be financed.

The second problem concerns quality. As has already been mentioned, the quality of care in the *hogares de bienestar* is variable. Improving that quality requires better training, more community involvement, and ultimately, probably more resources in order to achieve better results.

In developing the larger programme throughout the Costa Atlantica, the ICBF has been trying to encourage other sources of income. In Magdalena for example a private foundation has begun to help support the activities. However, the long-term sustainability of this type of work depends on stimulating the resources within communities. The restrictions on this depend

on the ability of the communities to contribute, not simply in financial terms, but their labour, their time. And that equation is intrinsically linked with the general condition of development. Thus, the solutions to educational provision have to be considered in the light of other activities in the fields of health and nutrition, sanitation, employment, housing, and so on.

A process of development

The Costa Atlántica project has helped to stimulate an awakening of developmental possibilities in many communities. But, as Jesús Ferro pointed out, there are also still many things to be done, such as

> *... the decrease in the illiteracy rate, in the mortality rate, in the birth rate, increases in attendance at primary school. There is a great deal to be done at the community level, particularly in this region which is very poor and has largely been abandoned by the central government. The municipalities themselves must develop their own alternative models or this will become an even poorer area. Another need is to take some of these models to other universities in other parts of the country.*

According to José Amar, the potential for utilising the 400,000 university students in Colombia is enormous. Even a small percentage of them becoming involved in these types of social programmes could start a process of change which would dwarf even the impressive outcomes of the Costa Atlántica project.

Francis Royett said that the work was important to him 'as a process of sensitisation and becoming aware of the reality in my country. It is significant also in the growing relationships I have with the people, and most important of all I think, is that seeing such a reality necessitates that I do something because community work is a part of my life.'

Alonso Macías described the work of the project team and the students as a *compromiso social*, a social commitment. 'Eight hours a day is not enough time. The team works evenings, weekends. The project team puts in more hours than it is paid for.' And so do the members of the community.

Along the way, it ceases to be a 'project' and becomes a way of life, a process of development. Barriers are broken down and the university staff and students, parents and community members and government officials all begin interacting at work and at play as equal members of society, with the right to influence the discussions and the decisions, with the power to change.

1 Similar findings have also been reported from studies in other countries. See, for example: Braithwaite, J., *Explorations in Early Childhood Education*, Canberra: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1983; Osborn, A.F. and Millbank, J.E., *The Effects of Early Education*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

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6 Ministerio de Educación Nacional, *Programa Escuela Nueva: Mas y Mejor Educación para los Niños Campesinos*, Bogotá, 1990

7 Anon., 'Greening of countryside children', *Jomtien Journal* (newspaper produced during the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990), 10 March 1990, p. 2

8 Amar Amar, J., *Los Hogares Comunales del Niño: Teoría y Experiencias*, Barranquilla: Uninorte, 1986, p. 155

Afterword

As much as I tried to keep myself out of this report, to let the ideas and the words of the people themselves come through, and to resist editorialising and passing value judgments about what I saw and heard, ultimately I found it impossible not to include a few additional comments. And in many ways it is part of the responsibility of an observer to make some comment. While I was in Colombia, people in the communities and members of the project staff constantly asked what I thought about the work being carried out – partly for reassurance and confirmation of their own beliefs in its quality and partly to ensure that I had understood the messages that they most desired to communicate.

Going through the final editing process for this report, some nine months after my visit to Colombia, many of the sounds of the communities, the expressions on the faces of the people I met, and the intensity of their experiences come back strongly. With them also comes a sense of anger that the absolute poverty which exists in many parts of Colombia, and elsewhere, is permitted, indeed often encouraged. That people are able not only to survive in such situations, but to aspire to greater things and to make possible some of those aspirations is a testimony to the strength of human character. That such situations even exist is equally a testimony to the failings of our global society to place emphasis on rational priorities.

For three decades, vast sums and considerable effort have been poured into development activities around the world and much brainpower and energy has gone into the debate about how to achieve a more equitable world. Yet every day 100 Colombian children die of hunger, every year nearly half of Colombia's children drop out of primary school before they have achieved even the beginnings of literacy and thus are effectively denied access to that debate.

Rethinking development

Often the enormity of the problems to be overcome – whether those faced by people living in impoverished *barrios* in developing countries or by the homeless and unemployed who exist on the streets of urban centres in the industrialised world – is itself a barrier to change. Increasingly, however, in development literature and in the experiences of practitioners, the glimmers of some solutions are beginning to emerge, as they have done in the Costa Atlántica project in Colombia.

The irony of it all is the sheer simplicity of the underlying concept: the recognition, as Camilo Madariaga said about the lack of food on the three-legged table, that from such a basic detail, a different strategy can be developed, one that pays more attention to the people who are 'being developed'. The paradox of this, however, is that its implementation is complex and requires a fundamental rethinking about how society is organised and how it could be organised, and what development really is.

According to Gran, 'development, in its broadest meaning, is the liberation of human potential'.[1] Above all else, it is an organic process, one which recognises that everyone has inherent worth and creative potential and deserves to be able to cultivate this in order to improve his or her life chances. This is a far from 'new' idea: its origins are as old as human life itself and appear and reappear in virtually all the mythologies, cultures, religions and philosophies ever recorded. It is explicit in the statutes of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, drafted in the mid-1960s and revised in the early 1970s.[2] Trying to put the concept into practice, however, is relatively new.

Gran contends that

> *To best develop and best use finite resources, humans need the maximum practical control ... over all aspects of development.... The poor must participate effectively in political and economic terms. Without this empowerment, significant economic advance is impossible.... This alternative strategy for human development is called participatory development.*[3]

In 1975, the Sweden-based Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation termed a similar set of ideas 'Another Development'.[4] Since that time, in a series of seminars, workshops and discussion papers, many of the fundamental ideas have been refined and elaborated upon. Of particular interest is a report first published in Spanish in 1986 and later in English in 1989 which talked about 'human scale development' as 'an option for the future'.[5] A key message was that 'there is no possibility for the active participation of people in gigantic systems which are hierarchically organised and where decisions flow from the top down to the bottom'.

Questions of scale

For many years now, development organisations (including the Bernard van Leer Foundation) that have supported successful small-scale projects have been attempting to ensure their implementation on a larger scale, usually by encouraging a government department or a large national institution to take over the operation. The rationale for this comes from a very positive motive: the desire to reach as many people as possible with a good development opportunity. In practice, the results (as, for example, in the Costa Atlántica case) have not always been optimal. Aside from the difficulty of maintaining popular participation in the larger structure, what usually occurs is a *product* rather than a *process* transfer. The pre-school, the primary school, the health care centre, the growth chart, the training manual are the things which are reproduced in quantity, not the *experience* of developing them and the impact which that had on the people involved. In focusing on the end-point, the value of the journey becomes lost.

Given a product-oriented rather than people-oriented world, such outcomes are not surprising. They are, however, wasteful and ultimately can be destructive. Consider for a moment the efforts of many of the communities in the Costa Atlántica where, over a period of years, a sense of 'being able to do' has been growing. Starting with small and manageable problems, solutions have been found, often with the resources available within the communities. The confidence engendered by this enabled the communities to look at larger, more complex problems and, in some cases, begin to tackle them. Yet there are some problems – inflation, the debt crisis, violence – which are of a different order: they are beyond the scope of a single community or even a group of communities, no matter how developed, how empowered its members may be. Equally, there are certain power structures within society that will always attempt to maintain control over their particular field of endeavour. The case of the adolescents in San Nicolás who had to negotiate with the electricity company for the power supply for their workshop, or the reluctance of the health workers to see a community pharmacy established, are illustrative. In both instances, something was achieved, although in the case of the pharmacy, not everything the people

wanted. But, as María Delfina Guerrero asked, what will happen when the people decide that they want something different from what is on offer from the higher authorities? Are there not some 'invisible' limits beyond which the poor, no matter how well organised and developed, are not permitted to go? And, if and when such a point is reached, could not the disillusionment they experience be translated into either violence or an even deeper apathy than that which they are beginning to overcome? In either case, the positive gains disappear.

Thus, the complexity of the question of scale becomes more evident. Small-scale or human-scale activities offer the benefits of a process-oriented development, but they have their own limitations. Large-scale, top-down efforts often fail to stimulate a genuine developmental process, but they ameliorate more symptoms of poverty, at least in the short term. The question becomes: how to take the essence of the 'journey', of the small-scale process, and inculcate it into the very fibre of the entire society, into its institutions, its culture, its power structures.

If one believes in the 'journey' design, there is no recipe. There is only the attempt to do it, and the learning process that emerges as a result. But, by accepting the need to embark on such a journey, the first step is already taken and the nature of a development 'project' begins to change into a development process. A project has a beginning and an end. There is no end to developing...

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Cited in Kavanaugh, J., *Journey of Trust. The Participatory Design of a Citizens Group for Social Empowerment* (mimeo), 1989, p. 57

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4 Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 'What Now: Another Development', *Development Dialogue*, 1975. See also: Nerfin, M. (ed.), *Another Development: Approaches and Strategies*, Uppsala, Sweden: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1977.

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Publications

Except where otherwise shown, the following publications are available free of charge to interested individuals and organisations. Please write to Publications and Media Unit, Bernard van Leer Foundation, PO Box 82334, 2508 EH, The Hague, The Netherlands.

Newsletter
The Foundation Newsletter reports on the work of Foundation-supported projects throughout the world and provides information on issues related to early childhood care and education. Published four times a year (January, April, July and October) in English. Copies of most back issues are available on request. ISSN 0921-5840

The Work of the Bernard van Leer Foundation
An introductory leaflet about the aims and work of the Foundation. Published 1989 in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch.

Current Programme 1990
This publication contains brief descriptions of 105 major projects being supported by the Foundation in 42 developing and industrialised countries. Illustrated throughout, the booklet also includes a report on the Foundation's work during 1989 and financial information. Published 1990 in English (ISSN 0921-5948) and in Spanish as *Programa Actual 1990* (ISSN 0924-302X)

Paths to Empowerment, Ruth Paz
This book traces the development of Foundation-supported community education projects in Israel over a 10-year period. Giving both theoretical background and practical examples, it illustrates how the values and operational modes of community development have been synthesised and incorporated into the world of early childhood education. Published 1990 in English. ISBN 90-6195-018-X

A Small Awakening: The Work of the Bernard van Leer Foundation 1965-1986, Hugh Philp with Andrew Chetley
Based on research undertaken by Professor Hugh Philp, the Foundation Con- sultant for Australasia, this publication traces the development of the Foundation through its projects and other activities over a 20-year period. From an initial focus on compensatory education, the Foundation's work has evolved, in the light of experience, to its present emphasis on the development of children in the context of their own environments. Published 1988 in English. ISBN 90-6195-015-5

Beyond Child Survival: Towards a New Future, Report of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1986-1987
The second biennial report of the Bernard van Leer Foundation covers activities during the years 1986 and 1987. The report includes feature articles on projects in Mozambique, Singapore, Ireland, Italy, Trinidad and Colombia as well as summaries of work undertaken during the period in 40 developing and industrialised countries. Published 1988 in English. ISSN 0921-5921

Occasional Papers

Early Childhood Care and Education: The Challenge, Walter Barker (Occasional Paper No 1)
The first in a series of Occasional Papers addressing issues of major importance to policy makers, practitioners and academics concerned with meeting the educational and developmental needs of disadvantaged children. Published 1987 in English.

Meeting the Needs of Young Children: Policy Alternatives,
Glen Nimnicht and Marta Arango with Lydia Hearn
(Occasional Paper No 2)
The paper reviews conventional, institution-based approaches to the care and education of young children in disadvantaged societies and proposes the development of alternative, low-cost strategies which take account of family and community resources and involvement as the starting point for such programmes. Published 1987 in English.

Evaluation in Action: A Case Study of an Under-fives Centre in Scotland, Joyce Watt (Occasional Paper No 3)
The main body of this paper is the evaluation report of a Foundation-supported project in the United Kingdom. It is preceded by an examination of the issues involved in evaluation together with an explanation of the way in which this particular study was carried out. It has been published with the external evaluator in mind, but will be of interest to all those involved in the evaluation of community-oriented projects. Published 1988 in English. ISBN 90-6195-014-7

Seminar Reports

Children and Community: Progressing Through Partnership
Summary report and conclusions of the tenth International Seminar held in Kingston, Jamaica in November 1988. Published 1989 in English and Spanish. ISBN 90-6195-016-3

Children at the Margin: A Challenge for Parents, Community and Professionals
Summary report and conclusions of the third Eastern Hemisphere Seminar held in Newcastle, Australia in November 1987. Published 1988 in English. ISBN 90-6195-013-9

The Parent as Prime Educator: Changing Patterns of Parenthood
Summary report and conclusions of the fourth Western Hemisphere Seminar held in Lima, Peru in May 1986. Published 1986 in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French.

Multicultural Societies: Early Childhood Education and Care
Summary report and conclusions of an International Seminar held in Granada, Spain in June 1984. Published 1984 in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

Integrated and Early Childhood Education: Preparation for Social Development
Summary report and conclusions of the second Eastern Hemisphere Seminar held in Salisbury, Zimbabwe, February/ March 1981. Published 1981 in English.

The following publications are available through booksellers or as shown. They are not available from the Foundation.

Explorations in Early Childhood Education, John Braithwaite 1985, Victoria, The Australian Council for Educational Research, Radford House, Frederick Street, Hawthorn, Victoria 3122, Australia. A$20 plus A$3 handling charge. ISBN 0-85563-478-2

The Gifted Disadvantaged: A Ten Year Longitudinal Study of Compensatory Education in Israel, Moshe Smilansky & David Nevo 1979, London/New York/Paris, Gordon & Breach Inc., 50 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10022, USA. US$ 46.25. ISBN 0-677-04400-0

The following four books are available, price £2.50 each, from Community Education Development Centre, Briton Road, Coventry, CV2 4LF, England. Please add £0.50 per £5.00 value of order for postage, plus £1.00 per order for overseas postage.

Women and Children First: Home Link, Elizabeth Filkin (ed)
This book presents an account of the Home Link project which has been serving residents of Liverpool, England continuously since 1973. Elizabeth Filkin has edited the work of a large group of women contributors to provide an open and self-critical assessment of the programme. Ypsilanti, The High/Scope Press, 1984. ISBN 0-931114-26-8

A Mole Cricket Called Servol, Gerard Pantin
In 1970 the newly independent nation of Trinidad and Tobago was rocked by a social explosion, and the effect on the traditional, easy-going way of life was catastrophic. This book describes how a Trinidadian Roman Catholic priest and a West Indian cricket player, went into the areas of poverty to try to help. Ypsilanti, The High/Scope Press, 1983. ISBN 0-931114-17-9

The Servol Village, Gerard Pantin
This book continues the story begun in **A Mole Cricket Called Servol** and describes how Servol has grown from a street corner community development project to a national movement in its own right. Ypsilanti, The High/Scope Press, 1984. ISBN 0-931114-27-6

Seeking Change, Ann Short
This book describes an early childhood education project for the children of disadvantaged families in South Africa. Ypsilanti, The High/Scope Press, 1984. ISBN 0-931114-29-2

The four books below report on the outcomes of the Project on Human Potential (1979-1984) supported by the Foundation and carried out by the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University, USA. They are available through booksellers.

Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Howard Gardner
New York, Basic Books, 1983. ISBN 0 465 02509 9 Available in paperback edition: London, Paladin Books, 1985, £5.95. ISBN 0-586-08506-8

Of Human Potential: An Essay in the Philosophy of Education.
Israel Scheffler
Boston/London/Melbourne, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985. ISBN 0-7102-0571-6

The Cultural Transition: Human Experience and Social Transformation in the Third World and Japan.
Merry I White and P Pollack (eds)
Boston/London/Melbourne, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986. ISBN 0-7102-0572-4

Human Conditions: The Cultural Basis of Educational Developments.
Robert A Levine and Merry White
Boston/London/Melbourne, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986. ISBN 0-7102-0568-6

What do the projects do?

All projects supported by the Foundation have, at their core, the education, care and development of young children. An essential ingredient of projects is the close involvement of the parents of the children and of the surrounding community. This is based on the belief that the home is the most important environment affecting human development, and that the community is also important. Projects do not therefore look only at educational activities which take place in pre-schools, nurseries or primary schools, they work with adults in their own homes and in the community in order to create understanding and awareness of children's developmental needs. This can include the importance of play, making toys and equipment from scrap materials and from the natural environment, information and advice on nutrition and health, and other needs of the children or the community. Many of the people doing this work are women from the same community who have been trained by the project. The involvement of parents and other adults helps to build up their own skills and self-confidence and this, in turn, leads to other improvements in the social and physical structure and the self-assurance of the community as a whole.

Geographical span

In accordance with its statutes, the Foundation gives preference to countries in which the Van Leer group of companies is established.

Applications for suppport

Decisions concerning the funding of major projects are taken by the Board of Trustees of the Foundation. No commitments can be given before such approval by the Board. There are no application forms and the Foundation does not prescribe a rigid formula for proposals. Potential applicants are strongly advised to submit an outline of their aims and objectives before preparing a detailed proposal.

Funds can be made available for the implementation of innovatory projects in the field of early childhood care and education. Applicants can be public bodies, academic or non-governmental institutions, or voluntary organisations. Grants are not given to individuals or for general support to organisations or in response to general appeals. The Foundation does not provide study, research or travel grants.

The Foundation recognises that projects in its field of work require time to develop and implement new approaches and grants are normally made for more than one year. The long-term sustainability of a project is an important consideration in the appraisal of proposals.